

**Fifty Fifty:
(Harriet Blue 2)
(Detective Harriet
Blue Series)**

James Patterson

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

She can save her brother.
Or she can save a whole town ...

FIFTY FIFTY



JAMES
PATTERSON

THE WORLD'S BESTSELLING THRILLER WRITER

AND CANDICE FOX

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ABOUT THE BOOK

It's not easy being a good detective ... when your brother's a serial killer.

Sam Blue stands accused of the brutal murders of three young students, their bodies dumped near the Georges River. Only one person believes he is innocent: his sister, Detective Harriet Blue. And she's determined to prove it.

Except she's now been banished to the outback town of Last Chance Valley (population 75), where a diary found on the roadside outlines a shocking plan – the massacre of the entire town. And the first death, shortly after Harry's arrival, suggests the clock is already ticking.

Meanwhile, back in Sydney, a young woman holds the key to crack Sam's case wide open.

If only she could escape the madman holding her hostage ...

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JAMES PATTERSON is one of the best-known and biggest-selling writers of all time. His books have sold in excess of 325 million copies worldwide. He is the author of some of the most popular series of the past two decades – the Alex Cross, Women’s Murder Club, Detective Michael Bennett and Private novels – and he has written many other number one bestsellers including romance novels and stand-alone thrillers.

James is passionate about encouraging children to read. Inspired by his own son who was a reluctant reader, he also writes a range of books for young readers including the Middle School, I Funny, Treasure Hunters, House of Robots, Confessions, and Maximum Ride series. James has donated millions in grants to independent bookshops and has been the most borrowed author in UK libraries for the past ten years in a row. He lives in Florida with his wife and son.

CANDICE FOX is the co-author of the *Sunday Times* No. 1 bestseller *Never Never*, the first novel in the Detective Harriet Blue series. She won back-to-back Ned Kelly awards for her first two novels *Hades* and *Eden*, and is also the author of the critically acclaimed *Fall* and *Crimson Lake*. She lives in Sydney, Australia.

ALSO BY JAMES PATTERSON

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Chapter 1

SHE WAS PERFECT. And so rarely the perfect ones came, fluttering out of the darkness like moths into golden light. Swift and uncatchable.

He had wandered the third floor of the car park for a couple of hours now, risking it all for his ideal victim. A number of young women had crossed the little grassy field below where he stood as classes at the university ended and new ones began. He watched them toting shoulder bags and the occasional paper coffee cup, blinking in the warm daylight. Then the place was deserted again, and he waited.

It was bright out, leaving a dark shadow in the corner of the parking lot, to the right of the fire stairs. He'd watched a potential girl enter the stairwell, his heart thumping, but she was only halfway up the concrete steps towards him before he realised she wasn't right. She had a friend on the phone. Cackling laughter. No. He'd know her when he saw her. Big doe eyes. Frightened, down-turned mouth. Thin wrists he could squeeze and twist.

The desire to flee picked at him. It was risky, hanging around too long. The university campus was on high alert after the police had found his previous works. Marissa. Elle. Rosetta. His brunette beauties mangled, ruined. Tragedies laid out on the sand. As news of the Georges River Killer spread, girls across campus had started dyeing and cutting their hair, walking in groups at night, having the security guards take them to their cars. It wasn't about the hair for him – although he hadn't failed to notice their striking resemblance to his first, many years ago. No, his university girls had simply been the right kind of innocent. Content, confident. He looked for the forthright stride, the high chin, the captive excitement of rosebuds just before they bloom.

He told himself to be patient. The plan had gone so well so far. His finale was worth the risk. A few more minutes. He wandered into the stairwell as he heard footsteps.

Then he saw her, her hand on the rail, gripping, pulling as she ascended. A slice of her soft cream brow and high cheekbone as she turned the corner.

Oh, there she was. His perfect girl.

Chapter 2

SHE EMERGED FROM the stairwell door and he swept an arm around her throat, yanked her backwards. The sickening rush of chemicals through his veins threatened to knock him off balance. She didn't make a sound at first. The breath left her instantly. Her bag fell. Then the clap of his palm over her mouth, her heels dragging as he turned and pulled her towards his vehicle.

'No!' a muffled wail. 'Stop! Stop! Stop!'

She bucked, twisted, tried to sink out of his arms. He was ready for the movement, knew the victim's dance by heart. He sank with her, gripped tighter, pulled her body hard against his. Never letting her think for a moment that she had a hope of escape. Hope was a dangerous thing.

He had no idea where it came from. She was totally under his control. But hope *had* infected her, as tangible in her body as an electric pulse. Without warning she stiffened, let go of his hands and swung her fists over her own head at his face.

A fumbling blow. The shock of it. He let her go. She hit the ground and the scream erupted out of her, rapturous, like a song. He punched her in the stomach, tried to gather her up. This wasn't the plan!

She twisted and scrambled against a car. He swiped at her. Missed.

She was up and running. And as she ran, she almost knocked over another girl standing there watching, mouth hanging open, phone in hand.

'Run!' his victim screamed at the girl, already disappearing into the fire stairs. 'Run!'

He righted himself. The new girl was too shocked, appalled by what she'd witnessed, to take a step back out of range. Big brown eyes, dark skin, the slowly opening and closing mouth of a woman feeling paralyzing terror wash over her.

She wasn't his perfect girl, but she was a delightful surprise.

He seized her wrist.

Chapter 3

SHE FIRST BECAME aware of the television in the corner, its robotic noises, bleeping and zooming and piercing jingles, the crash and tumble of advertisements. Caitlyn shifted her face against the mattress. She was sweating badly, or bleeding, she couldn't tell. She tried to speak and found her lips were sealed by tape. Panic shot through her. A spike of pain that reached from the heel of her bare foot to the crown of her skull. She turned, struggled against the tape on her wrists. Her nose was broken.

A damp concrete room. A bare mattress, a blanket bunched at the end. Rusty beer kegs and wooden crates, a pile of trash in the corner waist high. Mop heads and buckets and a milk crate full of bottles, a vacuum cleaner covered in an inch of dust. Caitlyn reeled, tried to get her bearings, scrabbled against the wall. Her ankles were bound. The terror was so loud in her brain that for a moment it blocked out all sound from the television. She saw him standing before the screen, turned away from her, his hands hanging by his sides.

The university. The car park. She'd been on the phone to her mother in California, fending off her ridiculous warnings about the killer on campus. It had been bright. Sunny. Afternoon. Then, in a snap, a different picture altogether, the curtain sailing closed and sailing open again on a horror-movie scene. The girl fighting with the hooded figure between the cars, rushing past her, a blur of heat. *Run! Run!* Caitlyn hadn't run. Hadn't done anything. And then he'd been right in front of her, impossibly fast, his fist swinging down towards her face.

Every story she'd ever heard of abduction and death and rape rushed through her mind, a whole catalogue of atrocities collected since she was a child and her teacher first taught them about Stranger Danger. True crime novels she'd browsed in airports. Macabre, late-night episodes of *SVU*, young girls being dragged out of sex dungeons, recounting atrocities, shivering in the witness stand. *Now you are one of them*, Caitlyn thought. *Now your nightmare begins.*

The man in front of the television was angry. His broad shoulders were high. She watched, wild-eyed, as he gripped the back of his shaven skull, ran a hand down his neck and back again, scratched hard. Caitlyn looked at the television screen just beyond him, the police leading a cuffed, black-haired man towards a waiting paddy wagon.

‘... the arrest of Samuel Jacob Blue over the murders of three young women abducted from the area surrounding the University of Sydney campus. Police say Blue was apprehended in ...’

‘This wasn’t the plan,’ the man with the shaved head murmured. He turned and glanced at Caitlyn where she sat huddled against the wall. He seemed to be assessing, his mind churning with decisions. ‘Fuck. Fuck!’

The rage rippled through him. She saw it creep up his arms until his neck tightened, the thick jugular standing out against sweat-sheened skin.

He turned and watched the screen and gripped his head again. ‘It wasn’t finished yet!’ Caitlyn watched as he knelt, almost shakily, before the screen. His fingers twitched, inches away from the glass, as Samuel Jacob Blue appeared, glancing fearfully at the crowd as the paddy wagon doors closed on him.

‘I need you,’ her captor said, his eyes locked on Blue. ‘I need you, Sam.’

Four months later ...

Chapter 4

FOUR MONTHS. ONE hundred and twenty-seven days, to be exact. That's how long my brother had been in prison for a crime he did not commit. I stood on the steps of the courthouse, ignoring my partner, trying to decide if my maths was correct. It was. As I waited, staring down at my ridiculous high heels, listening to the shouts of the crowd nearby, another day of Sam's life was being lost. I drew hard on my cigarette, clutched the stupid pink handbag into my side. The passing seconds were agony. Waiting for the court to open once again on the circus that was the Georges River Killer case. Another day I would fail to bring him home.

I am a Sex Crimes detective with the Sydney police. I used to think I was pretty good at my job. Versatile. Adaptable. I had a keen sense for bad men, and I wasn't afraid of bending the rules to make them admit what they were. A cracked tooth here, a broken finger there. I made men tremble in their seats. Harriet Blue: Terror at Five-Foot Two. While I was the natural enemy of the caged rape suspect, I could be also soft and gentle enough to coax a tiny, bruised child into revealing what his or her abuser had done, when no amount of coddling and bargaining by trained psychologists had struck paydirt.

But, four months earlier, my own colleagues had left the police station where I worked on their way to make the biggest arrest of their careers – a man they believed was a vicious serial killer who had tortured and murdered three university students. No amount of intuition, or skill, or training had prepared me for the fact that that man was my own flesh and blood.

Sam's case was all the nation was talking about. The newspapers were calling him Australia's worst serial killer, and that was no small claim – every article compared him with the fiends who'd taken up the mantle before him. Ivan Milat, the Backpacker Murderer. Arnold Sodeman, the Schoolgirl Strangler. Eric Edgar Cooke, the Night Caller. Now came Samuel Jacob Blue, the Georges River Killer, responsible for the prolonged, brutal deaths of three beautiful, young students.

For four months, I'd been determined to do everything right to help my brother go free. He was innocent. I was sure of it. The man who abducted, raped, tortured and strangled the three women I saw every night on the news was not the man who'd once been a boy snuggled beside me in the temporary beds at the offices of the Department of Children's Services. He was not that terrified boy, whispering to me in

the dark, wondering which foster home we were going to be shipped to next. He was not the teenager who'd defended me at various high schools when the kids came to pick on the shabby interlopers. The one who made me birthday cards when our new families forgot. Whoever he was, he did not have my brother's soulful kindness. His never-ending generosity.

On the footpath nearby, the usual gathering of gawkers and court ghouls waited for the doors to open. One caught my eye and spat on the ground, spoke loudly to his friend in the queue.

'She knew what he was up to,' he said. 'How could she not?'

'Don't listen, Harry.' My partner, Detective Edward Whittacker, tried to take my arm and turn me away from the crowd. 'You'll only make yourself madder.'

'I'm not mad,' I lied, shrugging him off. 'I'm cool. I'm calm. Today's going to be the day. We'll find it today. The key.'

I'd been talking about the 'key' to my brother's case since his arrest. The thing that freed him. A piece of false testimony. A surprise witness. Something, anything. I'd been looking into Sam's case, and I hadn't found the key that proved he wasn't the killer. But I had high hopes. Hell, my hopes got so high sometimes I had fantasies of the killer himself walking into the courtroom and confessing. Giving up was far from my mind.

I spotted my brother's prosecutor, the enormous, broad-shouldered Liam Woolfmyer, strolling towards us with a colleague beside him. Whitt had my arm again, his other hand fumbling at his necktie.

'Don't say a word,' he growled.

'You keep pawing at me and it'll be more than words you have to worry about.'

'I'm warning you, Harry.' Whitt glared over the top of his glasses at me. The gentle, fastidious detective had been mortified to hear me sneer a stream of obscenities at Woolfmyer the first morning of my brother's hearings.

Sometimes there's a wild Harriet in me, a woman I can't control. She rears her ugly head without warning. The comment from the queue already had her twitching. But then I stole a glance at Woolfmyer, and the worst of all things happened. He locked eyes with me, smiled, and leaned over in mock confidence to his companion.

'Samuel Blue won't last a single night in Long Bay prison,' Woolfmyer said. 'He's far too pretty. Someone will make him their bitch.'

The bad Harriet in me swelled, like white-hot steam, blinding and painful behind my eyes. As Woolfmyer passed I was already taking steps to catch up with him. I barely heard Whitt's call.

The few metres between Woolfmyer and me closed in an instant. I

was behind him. My hand reaching up, completely beyond my control.

I tapped him on the shoulder. Woolfmyer stopped and turned.

I punched him as hard as I could in the temple.

Chapter 5

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN a fighter. It's necessary, when you have a childhood like mine, to know how to defend yourself physically. I was a scrappy, dirty fighter before my police chief taught me how to box. He made the mistake of honing the self-taught craft of a brutal, remorseless combatant. Size means nothing when you know what you're doing. I swung up and to the left with a hard, balled right fist and smashed the prosecutor with all the force in my arm, shoulder and hip.

The only sound was the dull thump of his body on the pavement, the whisper of his settling robes, a big bird brought down out of the sky by a rifle blast.

My regret was instant. I looked around. Woolfmyer's friend staggering back. Whitt nearby, his hand still out, reaching, desperate. The crowd, a huddle of journalists. Horror and guilt rushed up through my body. Cameras flashed.

I felt a bizarre impulse to reach down and help the unconscious lawyer to his feet. To brush him off, slap him on the back, pretend it was all going to be OK.

But everything was far from OK. The police officer who had been guarding the front doors of the courthouse began to march towards me, taking his cuffs from his belt.

Chapter 6

I STOOD IN the entrance to the holding cell and stared at the women there. They were like lazy, uninterested cats lounging on the steel benches. One girl was lying on her belly on the floor, a magazine spread out before her. There were more magazines in a stack on one of the benches, trashy celebrity rags. An adult slumber party in a concrete bedroom. A gaggle of arrested shoplifters, prostitutes, drug runners. I went to the nearest bench and sat down, put my face in my hands as the steel door slammed shut.

I guessed a lot of women who ended up in a cell at the Parramatta Police headquarters thought what I was thinking in that moment. That their lives were over. That they'd had some fuck-ups in their lifetime, sure, but this was a whole new level of idiocy. Holding cells are where mistakes are offered up for evaluation. This is it. This is where all a person's chickens come home to roost.

Detective Inspector Nigel Spader was at the door to the holding cell now as I sat cracking my aching knuckles. He leaned on the wall and looked through the bars at me, folding his hairy ginger arms.

'Harriet,' he said. 'What a mess you've got yourself in.'

Spader had spearheaded the case against my brother. During the active investigation, I'd fought hard for entry onto the Georges River Task Force team, annoyed and confused as to why I was being kept away from what was possibly the nation's most important case. I had the skills. I had the enthusiasm. I'd had no idea that I was being shut out because the main suspect was Sam. I'd always hated Nigel anyway, had got into a few fistfights with him in the past.

'What's the word?' I asked.

'Mr Woolfmyer's going to be fine. He's got a mild concussion.'

'Is he going to go for an assault charge?'

'Of course he is,' Nigel snorted. 'You knocked him out cold.' 'Woolfmyer, the lawyer?' the girl on the ground broke in. 'You punched a lawyer?'

I turned towards Nigel and tried to signal that my conversation with him wasn't for public consumption. But the other women in the holding cell were watching me with interest now.

'If they're going to lock me up, I want my notes on Sam's case,' I said. 'They're in my handbag. I'll still be able to work on his defence.'

'Harry.' Nigel shifted closer to the bars. 'Your brother is a killer. You're going to have to move past the denial phase and wake up to

what's happening here. I know you and I have had our differences. But we didn't lock him up to spite you. We locked him up because he murdered three girls.'

I grabbed a handful of the magazines from the stack beside me and hurled them at the bars. Nigel flinched. The girls in the cell around me cheered. I was shocked by the noise, brought suddenly out of my fury. I realised my jaw was clenched so tight that my teeth were clicking as they ground together.

'I reckon you forced that confession out of him,' I told Nigel, giving my fellow inmates a warning look. 'There was a lot of pressure to catch the killer.'

Nigel shook his head. 'Harry, you and Sam are violent people. I've experienced your family's violence personally.' He touched his brow, an old scar I'd given him about the seventh or eighth time he'd parked in my designated spot.

The girl on the floor had shifted closer to me, her grin spread wide.

'Wait a minute,' she chirped up. 'You mean, you punched this guy, too?' she said, flicking her chin at my colleague.

'I did,' I said. I looked at Nigel. 'And he cried like a baby.'

Chapter 7

I WAS TEACHING the women in the cell how to land a left hook without fracturing their wrists when I noticed Pops standing at the door, waiting for the guard to unlock it.

My chief. My friend. My boxing trainer, a man who'd also seen the hair-trigger aggression that thrived in the very marrow of my bones. Pops said nothing as we walked down the sterile hall towards the offices. I tottered on my ridiculous heels. Eventually I stopped, reached down and pulled them off. We were standing between the row of holding cells and the doors to the bullpen where my colleagues worked, a corridor between two worlds. My brother existed in the world we'd just walked through, the criminal world. My own life, until then, had been ahead of us, in the swirling blue universe of police and their struggle against evil-doers. Here I was, balancing on the tightrope connecting the two.

'I had a private chat to Judge Steiner,' Pops said. 'We went ahead and held the assault hearing in your absence.'

'What?' I said. Suddenly, I could hardly find words, which was unusual for me.

'Woolfmyer agreed not to push forward with an assault conviction, but he applied for an AVO, and Steiner granted it.'

Still no words came.

Pops raised his bushy eyebrows. 'Yeah. You're banned from the trial. You're banned from the entire courthouse, in fact. You're not allowed to come within five hundred metres of Prosecutor Woolfmyer. Which means anywhere he regularly goes is off limits to you. The prison where your brother is, for example. Sam's lawyer's office.'

'This is ...' I was shivering with rage.

'This is perfectly reasonable.' Pops shrugged, angry. 'Judge Steiner could have recorded the conviction *and* granted Woolfmyer the apprehended violence order. But he didn't. Because I convinced him you were going to get your arse out of town.'

A young probationary constable was walking up the hall with my handbag, confiscated from me when I was arrested. I snatched the stupid pink bag off him and started rummaging through it for cigarettes.

'I told Steiner I'd find you a case. Send you off into the desert again for a couple of weeks so you can cool down.'

'I'm not going back out there,' I snapped. 'I'm going to sit on the

front steps of the courthouse. If I can't go inside, I'll still be there. I'm not leaving Sam.'

'That's exactly what Judge Steiner said you'd do.' Pops shook his head. 'He wanted to lock you up instead. I said you're not going to be on the courthouse steps. You'll be out in the desert, out of trouble, just like you were after they picked Sam up.'

'Nope,' I said. 'Not happening.'

I couldn't find my cigarettes. My hands were shaking too badly.

'Blue,' Pops called as I walked towards the door, following at my heels. 'This is not up for discussion. You get out of here or he'll reverse his decision. And then you'll be no good to Sam at all. You want to try working on his defence from a jail cell? You'll be lucky if they give you paper and a pencil in there.'

I stopped by the big glass doors.

There was a certain appeal to what he was saying. I could go back out into the Australian badlands, out among the tiny towns where people who didn't want to be recognised fled. I could run away from the horror of my brother's situation. Blessed denial.

'When does the order expire?'

'Nine days.'

I bit my lip. I wanted so badly to cry. But I was not a crier. I was not weak. I squeezed the doorhandle, trying to hold on to some semblance of control.

'You fucked up, Blue,' Pops said. It was rare that he swore. I looked at his eyes. 'You're a hothead. And I love that about you. It's half of what makes you a good cop. Your fearlessness. Your fire. But you need to get away from here before you do some real damage. This?' He flipped the frilly collar of my blouse. 'This is not working. When you're not bashing prosecutors you're standing around pissed as hell and doing a bad job hiding it. The princess get-up makes you look about as harmless as a hired assassin.'

I exhaled. I wanted a hug. But I was not a hugger, either.

'It's only nine days,' he said. 'How bad could things go in that time?'

Chapter 8

I LEANED MY head against the car window in the dark.

Beyond the glass, New South Wales desert rolled by, barren and hard. I was out here again. In exile for my own good, for the good of Sam's case.

I was six hours from Sydney, four of them by plane, two of them by car, on the straight edge of the western border of New South Wales. Red dirt country. We were headed to a tiny, dim star in a constellation of sparse towns, most notably White Cliffs to the south of us (population 103) and Tibooburra to the west of us (population 262). My driver, a plump and pretty blonde woman wearing a dusty police uniform and standard-issue baseball cap, shifted uncomfortably behind the wheel. She'd been jibber-jabbering since we left the airstrip, about the region, its history, seasonal precautions about snakes. I was so angry at myself, so distracted, I'd hardly been answering her. I sighed quietly. She was gearing up to take a run at me about why I was there. How I could possibly explain what I'd done? I could feel it – the curiosity.

'So the papers said ...' She licked her lips, hesitated, as most people do. 'They said that the lawyer made some derogatory remark towards you?'

'My brother,' I answered. 'He made a joke about my brother being raped in prison. I work in Sex Crimes. Rape jokes aren't funny.'

'Struth! You're right, they're not. Plus, it's your brother,' the cop sympathised. 'I mean, it doesn't matter what he did. He's still –'

'He didn't do anything. He's innocent,' I said.

I realised miserably that I didn't even know this officer's name. My mind was so tangled up in my personal life that I'd completely forgotten it as soon as she'd introduced herself. I reached down for the case file at my feet and pretended I was shifting it to the back seat so it wouldn't get damaged. I glanced at the name on the cover. Senior Sergeant Victoria Snale.

'I've got to say,' – Snale's voice was irrepressibly cheerful – 'it made an amazing picture for the front pages. You standing over the lawyer. Him all splayed out on the concrete. It must have really been some punch.'

I felt microscopically uplifted. 'It doesn't have to be hard if it's on target.'

'And now you're here,' she sighed brightly. 'I can't say I'm sad about

that. It's pretty lonely out here, to be honest. It'll be good to have some more cops around. Someone who can relate. You know?'

'How many cops are there in town?' I asked.

'Active officers? I mean, we have one retiree ...'

'Active officers.'

'Just me.' She looked over, smiled. 'Just *us*.'

I didn't want to burst Snale's bubble, but I didn't plan on being out in the desert long. *Nine days* of 'us'. Then it'd be back to Victoria Snale: Lone Ranger.

The moment Prosecutor Woolfmyer's AVO expired, I'd be back – back in that jerk's face, fighting him and the state's crack team of lawyers about my brother's innocence.

The empty desert around me was familiar. I'd been shoved aside when Sam had first been arrested, shipped out into the middle of nowhere, away from the public eye, away from my distinctly uncomfortable colleagues and their guilty looks after months of lying to me. Back then, I'd succumbed to the journey. I'd felt such shameful pleasure at having something to think about that was not Sam and what he was facing. Now was no different.

I squeezed my folder of notes on Sam's case against my chest. A thick binder of papers detailing all the leads I'd tried to chase down. Most of the work I'd done was hopeless, dead ends I'd pursued over the months searching for something, anything, that might set my brother free. The binder was battered and bruised, but it was my lifeline. I wasn't leaving it behind. I wasn't putting it in my bag. I was hanging on to it. As long as I had the binder, I wasn't abandoning Sam.

Chapter 9

‘LET’S CHECK OUT the view before we go down,’ Victoria Snale said, beaming. ‘You’ll love it.’

The officer pulled the four-wheel drive off the side of the highway and let it rumble to a stop. I climbed out and breathed the desert air, felt the warm wind ruffle my hair. The great domed sky was heavy with stars. I felt so far from where I belonged. Wonderfully small.

‘Come this way,’ Snale beckoned me, kicking up dust in the car’s headlights. ‘This is it.’

I stood with her on the edge of a rocky cliff in the dark. ‘This is Last Chance Valley,’ she said.

She swept her hand dramatically across the landscape, indicating a less-than-impressive collection of gold lights clustered at the bottom of a moonlit rise. I nodded, made an interested noise. I felt bad for being so distant for the whole trip towards the town.

‘You can’t see it very well right now, but the town is actually at the bottom of a massive crater.’ She pointed to the curve of the rise we stood on. ‘Biggest crater in the Southern Hemisphere. This ridge is just the edge, it runs all the way around. It’s sort of egg-shaped, with the town right in the centre and properties spreading out around. The first family settled down there two hundred years ago. There are seventy-five residents now.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘They’re not sure what formed the crater, but it may have been a volcano. A meteorite. Every now and then somebody comes out and runs a study on the place. Very exciting stuff. I usually get to brief the town on their visits, tell everybody to behave themselves.’

‘Sounds great.’

‘I guess the settlers thought the crater might shelter us from the desert dust storms,’ she mused, rolling a rock under her boot. ‘It doesn’t. In fact it makes things worse. We get about ten centimetres of dust when the summer winds roll in. It also floods real bad, and the floodwaters hold beneath the earth. When it floods, we get green grass. We can grow wheat here. There’s plenty of cattle. But, being the only grass around for thousands and thousands of kilometres, we get locust plagues.’

I was glad Snale was the local cop and not the tourism director. I tried to maintain a serious face.

‘Locusts?’ I said.

‘Yeah, we’re just getting over the last plague. Here’s one right now, in fact.’

She reached out towards me, and I realised a creature was walking up my bicep, an enormous brown grasshopper covered in the patterns of the desert, spots and stripes in red and brown. I didn’t scream. But it wasn’t easy.

Snale plucked the creature from my shirt and tossed it into the wind. It fluttered into the dark.

‘Oh great,’ I said, brushing off the place where the thing had been. ‘This is great.’

‘They bite, but it’s not that painful.’

‘And what exactly will I be working on out here?’ I asked.

‘Well,’ she said cheerfully. ‘Turns out somebody’s planning to kill us all.’

Chapter 10

WE SAT IN the car together and Snale took a package from the glove compartment. It was a notebook secured in a police evidence bag, a sheaf of photocopies, which she handed to me. She started the car but kept the overhead light on so I could read as she drove.

‘A trucker found this diary in a backpack on the side of this highway, at a rest stop.’ She pointed over her shoulder. ‘Back the way we came, about five kilometres. He spotted it sitting there when he stopped to pull a dead roo from his front grille. Brought the diary into town and handed it in to me. It contains detailed analyses of spree killers, weapons, massacre plans. We think someone is, or was, constructing a plan to kill as many people in Last Chance Valley as possible.’

‘When was this?’

‘Two days ago.’

‘And you vetted the truck driver?’

‘Yeah, I let him go.’

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as I looked at the photocopied pages before me. My eyes breezed over the tight, small writing and fell upon the hand-drawn images, sketches of a person in a hood running towards fleeing groups of people, mowing them down with a huge rifle. There were diagrams of the layout of the town below, lists of names and addresses. I examined the notebook in the evidence bag, turned it over. Of course, there was no name on it. That’d be too much to hope for.

The thing that struck me immediately about the pages I was looking through was the sheer weight of preparation that the diarist had gone to. Every page was filled on both sides with either illustrations or notes, or with excerpts from books that had been copied and pasted onto some pages. It was all very calm and methodical. Where there were illustrations, they were very well done. More like scenes of war than the macabre scribbles of a maniac. There were photographs of buildings, I assumed areas of the tiny town below us from different angles. This was more than a speculative work. This was serious.

Snale drove us over the edge of the crater and down towards its depths. I looked up at the other edge of the valley, rocky and pointed against the burnt-orange light.

And as I looked across the crater I saw the explosion.

The sound it made took seconds to reach us across the distance. A

bass thump I felt in the centre of my chest.

The sky lit up with a fireball directly across from us, on the steep rise.

‘Oh my God!’ Snale swerved, gripping the wheel.

I shoved the papers aside and sat bolt upright. ‘Get there. Get there *now!*’

Chapter 11

THE EXPLOSION ON the other side of the town seemed to have ignited the brush there in flames. I kept my eyes on the dim glow as we raced up the main street and between the fields beyond. Small houses. Fences. Snale's jaw was set. She squinted at the dark rise before us.

'Might have been kids with fireworks,' she murmured. 'The kids around here, they're pretty feral.'

'Those are some pretty big fireworks,' I said.

We took the winding road up the slope at a roaring pace. I gripped the door of the vehicle as Snale took the corners. Country driver. She'd been taking these roads at breakneck speed since girlhood.

We could smell the blast zone from the side of the road as we parked. Snale was no athlete but she bounded into the bush ahead of me, agile as a rabbit, her gun drawn. I had no torch, but followed the bouncing white light of hers, razor-sharp desert plants slicing at my jeans. The fire was burning itself out in the tough grass and the oily leaves of the eucalypts above us.

The smoke seared my eyes. We split up. I almost tripped over a plastic chair, or what remained of it. Three of its metal legs were buried in the dirt, and the back had melted to a black husk, sharp, sticking upwards like a dagger. Snale came back to me, huffing, winding her torch beam across my face, then to where I was crouched, examining the chair.

'Can I?' I grabbed the torch and swept it over the chair, found the crater where the bomb had gone off. There were bodily remains here, tangled in the dirt and grass. The blackened and burned slivers of flesh of something or someone blown to bits.

'Oh no,' Snale was saying gently, following close behind me. 'Oh no. Oh no.'

I zeroed in on a shiny object – a hand wheel valve. There were splinters of metal shining in the dust. Entrails, blood everywhere. Hair. An animal? I nudged the valve with my boot, didn't have evidence bags with me.

'Propane gas bottle,' I said.

'Oh man,' Snale gave a frightened shudder, taking the torch from me with her cold fingers. 'Oh maaaaan!'

I followed her. She'd noticed something hanging from a nearby branch, swinging gently in the breeze. It was a man's hand and forearm, blackened and charred, held there by the remains of a shred

of melted duct tape. The tape wrapped around the wrist seemed burned to the flesh.

I was just beginning to wonder how on Earth it was still hanging on when it fell, slapping to the ground at our feet. Snale yelped in terror. She grabbed at me as a new fear rushed through her; the sound of a large vehicle leaving the roadside back near where we'd parked.

We could hear it crashing through the undergrowth towards us.

Chapter 12

DEER HUNTING LIGHTS. Eight of them. They pierced the night around us, blasting through my vision, making me cower behind my arm. It was like an alien ship landing. Snale cocked her weapon, but in seconds she seemed to relax.

‘Oh. It’s only Kash,’ she said. There was a slight upward lilt to her voice, like she’d just been given good news. I was still blinded. I stumbled forwards, grabbing the back of her shirt to guide me through the painfully illuminated blast zone.

‘Jesus, those lights!’

‘Hands up!’ someone bellowed. ‘Identify yourselves!’

‘It’s me!’ Snale put her hands up. I didn’t bother. ‘It’s us. Vicky, and my new friend Harriet.’

I thought ‘friend’ was going a bit far.

An enormous man emerged out of the light like an over-excited dog, a flurry of hard breath and wild gesturing. Incredibly, he had a torch in his hand.

‘Vicky. Right. Have you seen the suspect? Where’s the suspect? Any signs of where he went?’

‘The what?’ I tried to see his face, glimpsing a chiselled jaw, black curls. ‘What suspect?’

‘You,’ Kash pointed at me, ‘head down the hill and sweep south-east in a standard second-leg search pattern. Snale and I will take south-west. Give it a K, maybe a K and a half. We’ll meet back here in twenty.’

‘A search?’ I yelled. ‘Using what? I’m not sure I’ll ever see again.’

‘Double time! Let’s go!’

The muscled goliath took off into the bush, crashing over plants and shrubs like a tank. I jogged, confused, in the general direction he’d indicated.

There was nothing to indicate that a suspect was on the loose. But the big man in the dark had overcome my decision-making abilities with his barking voice, like a slap to the side of the head. I was annoyed and bristled, but I did what he said. There was no one south or east of the blast zone.

Snale and the big man, Kash, were there when I returned. She was searching the remains again with her torch beam. Kash was standing uselessly with his hands on his hips, looking generally ‘in charge’ of whatever might have been about to happen. In the light of the

enormous truck I saw an action-figure body and Clark Kent glasses on a head as square and thick as a sandstone block. When I came back into the light, he walked towards me, hand extended.

‘Elliot Kash, Counter-Terrorism Task Force, Islamic Fundamentalism Division, ASIO.’

‘Of course.’ I nodded. I understood all the dramatics now. This guy was in national security. I’d come across his type before. ‘Of course you are.’

‘You’ve heard of me then? Good. That’ll save time. Let’s secure the entry to the blast zone, erect a checkpoint on the road. We’ll do hourly sweeps of the search grid to see if the suspect comes back. They often return to film their work for their online campaigns.’

I noticed Kash hadn’t asked me for my name, or a long-winded explanation of my position within the police. I let it go.

‘Who exactly are you talking about?’ I asked. ‘We’ve got a dead guy and a bomb. How do you know who else was involved?’

‘You’ve seen the diary?’

‘Barely,’ I said.

‘Well, you’re behind,’ Kash sighed. ‘You can get a debriefing once we’ve established a secure boundary. We need to act now and ask questions later. Get going. I’ll take charge here.’

I suffered the same verbal slap to the head, the phenomenon of compliance sweeping over me like a spell. I found myself walking back towards the road, thinking I’d move Snale’s truck, put lights on the road, see if she had some traffic cones in the back to guide any passers-by onto the shoulder so we could question them. I didn’t further analyse Kash’s resolve that a dangerous suspect was behind this, and that it was possible he or she was somewhere around here.

The spell wore off before I hit the roadside. I stopped, frowned, tried to get my thoughts in order. Snale bumped into me from behind. She’d been jogging up the path behind me.

‘Sorry,’ she sniffed. ‘I’ve got to get to the radio and call in the team from the next town over. We need more people. This is bad. This is really bad.’

‘It’s OK.’ I jogged alongside her. This was probably the most terrible crime to ever happen in Last Chance Valley. Maybe the only serious crime they’d ever had. ‘Agent Dickhead’s got it all under control.’

‘You don’t understand,’ she said. ‘I just found the victim’s head. I know who he is. He’s my chief.’

Chapter 13

HE CAME EVERY second night when the temperature began to sink, at what Caitlyn assumed was sunset outside her concrete room. The first few times, she tried to brace herself for what was about to happen. She visualised it for hours on end, her skin crawling and stomach turning, trying to decide how she would endure the rape or torture or prolonged death he had planned for her. But after a week, when none of those things had happened, a deep, sickening confusion set in. And then there was the rage. Caitlyn sat on the mattress in the dark and boiled with a quiet, dangerous rage.

The man with the shaved head came and unlocked the door, walked down the steps and put her supplies on the floor. Two packaged sandwiches, one chicken and one roast beef, the kind a person buys at the service station. Two bottles of water. Two chocolate bars. One roll of toilet paper for the bucket in the corner. He wouldn't look at her. The ritual was always the same. He came, he dropped the supplies, he changed the bucket and he left, locking the door securely behind him.

Caitlyn had tried everything she could think of. She'd waited by the door and swung a wine bottle she'd found in the crates at his head, missed her target by centimetres. The wine was expired and tasted foul, but after breaking a couple of bottles she'd come up with a good, shiny dagger that she came at him with the next time, again to no avail. He'd shoved her hard down the stairs, and she'd lain crying, the back of her head bleeding on the cold stone floor.

The next time, she'd been a bit trickier. Caitlyn had pulled lengths of fabric from the old mattress and woven them into a strong tripwire, pulled this across the doorway. He'd tripped, and she'd launched herself at him, clubbed him hard in the back of the skull with a lump of wood broken from one of the crates. She'd got through the doorway and looked down the dark hall that led to wherever she was before he'd grabbed her ankle and dragged her back into her prison room. Down the hall she'd seen a long concrete walkway, stairs to the upper levels, and plenty more heavy trash that he dragged in front of the door after he locked it. Caitlyn glimpsed flyers on the ground, warped and yellowed, a box of moulded brass numbers, the kind a person would screw to a door or the front of a house. An old hotel? The power must still be turned on for her television to work. Why couldn't anyone hear her cries? Was she underground?

Caitlyn didn't know if her captor was just unusually strong or if the

rations and the lack of sleep had left her weak. She was no match for him. As the days passed, it became harder for her to wake. Harder to think. Harder to cry. In the daytime, she screamed for help. At night she sat and watched the television in the corner, pulling at strands of her hair.

Caitlyn recognised this for what it was. A holding pattern. Something had gone wrong with his plan, whatever it had been. Now he was simply keeping her alive. Uninterested. Out of ideas. If he didn't want sex from her, and he didn't want to torture her, and he didn't want to talk to her, why the hell was he doing this?

When the news came on, it was more often than not about the Georges River Killer's arrest. Sam Blue had featured in the media for months.

She sat chewing her nails and remembering the first night in the concrete bunker, one of the only times she'd seen her captor show overt emotion. Surprise and rage at the image of Samuel Blue on the screen. He'd said it wasn't finished yet. That this wasn't the plan.

What wasn't the plan? Caitlyn knew she hadn't been her captor's planned victim. That the girl she'd interrupted him trying to abduct had been the one who was supposed to be here now. But was it more than that? Caitlyn remembered the man standing before the television screen, running his fingers up the back of his skull, gripping at the muscles in his neck as they locked, rock hard, with anger. Sam Blue's arrest. Did that have something to do with it all?

Was this man the Georges River Killer's partner?

Chapter 14

EDWARD WHITTACKER STRAIGHTENED his tie in his reflection in the courthouse windows, smoothed down a cowlick at the side of his narrow head. He felt strangely lonely without Harriet, although she'd been so detached since the beginning of the Blue hearings that sometimes he'd forgotten she was there beside him, fidgeting in her 'pretty sister' get-up.

She'd been impossible to talk to in the weeks since their return from the desert, when Whitt decided he'd leave his home in Perth and come to Sydney to support the new partner he'd learned to admire. She was a hard creature, Harriet Blue. Unpredictable and sharp edged. When he'd met her on their case in Western Australia, her brother had just been arrested, and she'd been stripped bare of the minimal friendliness she managed to maintain in order to get on with others. But in their time in the Outback, fleeing a sniper who was hunting young men and women like dogs, the Sex Crimes detective had grown on him. She was a good person, even if that goodness was buried deep under plenty of bad behaviour. He wanted to help her. And now that she'd gone and got herself banished from the courthouse altogether, he had no choice but to be her representative. It was what good friends did.

Whitt now stood watching at the edge of the crowd gathered around the New South Wales Police Commissioner on the courthouse steps, a tall, broad man wearing a uniform laden in red and silver buckles and stars. Microphones bobbed and swayed as Commissioner Sorrell moved his head. A petite journalist at the front of the crowd was trying not to be pressed against the man by the bigger journalists behind her shoving forwards to catch quotes.

'We have faith that Caitlyn McBeal will be located safe and well,' Sorrell said. 'We know that she has not fallen victim to the Georges River Killer, because our primary suspect in that case was under surveillance the entire day she disappeared. At the approximate time of Caitlyn's last confirmed sighting four months ago, Sydney police detectives already had Samuel Jacob Blue in custody. That's all I can say right now.'

Whitt knew some of the inside information about the Caitlyn McBeal abduction. The supposed incident at the University of Sydney hadn't even made the news right away. Television screens across the country had been flooded with images of Sam Blue's arrest from that

morning. But way down the list of items on online news sites, a vague story was emerging. A young student from the university, Linny Simpson, was claiming someone had tried to abduct her from a car park and she'd managed to escape, passing an African American girl as she ran to safety. That African American girl fit the description of the now-missing Caitlyn McBeal.

Whitt had been exhilarated. Was this the Georges River Killer, trying to nab another victim only hours after Sam had been arrested? If it was, then surely Sam would go free! The nightmare for his friend and her brother would be over. All they had to do was find Caitlyn McBeal.

Then problems started to emerge with Linny and her tale. Linny admitted she'd fainted after reaching the bottom of the stairs of the car park, terrified by her ordeal. She'd hit her head and suffered a concussion. Details of her ordeal were inconsistent across her interviews with police. Her abductor had tried to get her into a white van. No, a green van. He'd been tall. Maybe not so tall. There had been another girl in the car park. Caitlyn and one other. Two others, maybe.

Then Linny's history was exposed. Her teenage drug use. A stalking report against an ex-boyfriend that had been entered and then withdrawn. The police were still searching for Caitlyn McBeal, and were heartened by reported sightings of her in Queensland. Maybe she'd just run off. That was the solution in most Missing Persons cases. The stress and struggle of daily life simply got too much. They dropped their belongings and fled, started again somewhere new. Whitt had seen it plenty of times during his career. He'd seen mothers lock the front door on their children and simply wander off, turning up years later with a new name, a new job, halfway across the country. Caitlyn was young and alone on the opposite side of the planet from her life back home. She had no serious commitments. Disappearing, even just for a while, would be easy.

Whatever had happened to Caitlyn, Linny Simpson's explanation for it wasn't anyone's favourite lead, because she was inconsistent. Confused.

But if she was right, even somewhere *close* to the truth, it meant two things that no one on the Georges River case wanted to admit.

That Sam Blue was innocent.

And that the killer was still out there.

Chapter 15

I STOOD BY the side of the road, watching the sun rising on the distant edge of the crater, a depthless black in silhouette against warm pink. The temperature was coming up fast. Soon the town below me would be swirling with gossip about the explosion in the early hours. Already, local farmers who had heard the bang and become curious had started to line the roadside, eyeing me cautiously as they met with Snale to get the lowdown.

The town's only police officer was barely keeping it together. Snale's chief, a man in his sixties named Theo 'Soupy' Campbell, owned the bloodied, dirt-clodded head she had found about ten metres from the centre of the blast zone. I assumed he'd owned the arm we'd seen hanging from the tree, and the various other bits and pieces of human that had been strewn about the bush. We hadn't done too much more wandering around in the crime scene. It was best to leave it for Forensics, who would soon be boarding a helicopter back in Sydney. The entire police force from the nearest town, Milparinka, were on their way to help us secure the scene and the dead police chief's truck, which we'd found parked in the bush on the opposite side of the road to the blast. Milparinka's force comprised two officers, bringing our total to five. I felt drastically out of my depth. I was used to securing crime scenes with the help of dozens of people, patrolies covering doorways with tape, chiefs standing about looking important before the cameras, Forensics experts donning their gear.

I went to Snale's truck and sat in the front passenger seat with the door open, brought out the photocopy of the diary and began reading through it again. I didn't want to leap to any conclusions about the connection of the bomb to the book. Yes, what had happened to Chief Campbell looked like murder. The duct tape on the wrist was a sure sign, even if one accepted the highly improbable idea that he'd chosen to commit suicide by bomb when he likely had a perfectly good gun in his possession. I needed to find something in the diary that connected the idea and the crime.

The first pages were all about guns. I spread a page over my knee and looked at the photocopied pictures of two handsome teenage boys.

The page was a study of the Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who'd gone on a shooting spree at their local high school in Colorado, killing twelve students and a teacher and injuring

twenty-four others. I knew the story, had read a couple of true crime books about it. The diarist had made a list, beside a doodled sketch of the wolfish Harris, entitled 'Successes'.

- 1. Kept the circle of conspirators small.*
- 2. Surveillance of victims for maximum impact.*
- 3. Covert weapons purchases.*

What was this? A list of the things the Columbine killers had done right in their evil plan? Was the diarist comparing and contrasting the massacre plans of high-profile shooters to come up with the perfect kill plot? I flipped the page. More about the Columbine killers' work, excerpts from the boys' diaries and maps of their school. There were five pages dedicated to the Columbine shooting in the diary. A sickly feeling was creeping up from the pit of my stomach. I ran my fingers over a note at the bottom of the last page on Columbine.

Thirteen victims, it read. I can beat that!

Chapter 16

ELLIOT KASH HAD come to the open door of the car and leaned on the window, folding his thick arms on the sill. I reached for a cigarette. I figured I was going to need one.

'I've had a chat with Victoria about our operations, but I really want to sit down with you before this thing kicks into high gear so you can download my concerns,' he said. 'The priority right now needs to be security. I want maximum operational confidentiality throughout this case. We need to keep covert information tight. This is a small town, and we know there's a lone wolf or, possibly, a terrorist sleeper cell hidden within it. We cannot afford unplanned leaks right now.'

I exhaled smoke into the thin morning air. 'I have so many problems with what you just said, I don't even know where to start.'

'Oh really?'

'Yes, really.' I looked at the town in the distance. 'You want to sit down with me so I can download your operational concerns? Who the fuck gave you authority over this case?'

'I did,' he scoffed. 'I'm Federal. Did you miss that?'

'How could I? *Maximum operational confidentiality*? Who talks like that?'

'I do.'

'Yeah, you and G.I. Joe.'

'Well, you know I'm the Fed in this relationship. So I'm in charge.'

'You'll be in charge when we establish this is radical Islamist terrorism,' I said, flipping the pages of the diary. 'Which, if this diary gives us any indication, is going to be *never*. There's nothing even mildly Islamic-looking in here. All I can see thus far is praise for dickhead white-boy school shooters.'

'That diary is pure terrorism, and I'm the terrorism expert, so I have jurisdiction,' he said.

'Nope.'

'Yes!'

'Nope,' I repeated. 'You can have jurisdiction when the Attorney-General flies his big golden helicopter into the middle of nowhere, waddles his fat arse up the hill to where I'm sitting and tells me you have jurisdiction.' I put my feet up on the dashboard. 'Until then, it's a three-way partnership. You, me and Vicky.'

Kash laughed, leaned in. 'Officer Snale's experience is in chasing down lost cattle dogs and wrangling drunks out of the local pub. She'll

be useful for local intel only.'

I ignored him. 'My next concern is with your presumption that I'd leak operational information even if this *was* a federal case. Are you serious?'

'Of course I'm serious,' he said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of newspaper. I couldn't stop a grimace rising to my face at the image of me on the front page of the *Telegraph*, my legs splayed over the body of Prosecutor Woolfmyer. I looked like a pint-sized Wonder Woman action figure, my breasts straining against the ridiculous blouse. I tried to contain my fury.

'Is this not you?' Kash gave a crooked, patronising grin.

'Oh, fuck off.'

'No one told me I was going to have to babysit an insubordinate, dangerous state cop while I was posted here,' he said. 'This was supposed to be a very exclusive task force. Me, advising the local authority.' He jabbed a thumb in Snale's direction. 'That's how it works with this type of case. You get an expert in, and he infiltrates, taking the suspects down when they show themselves. If I have to have you along, I don't want any of this kind of behaviour.'

He thrust the newspaper page at me. I let it slide to the floor of the car.

'Maybe you're feeling hostile because of your brother's situation,' Kash said. 'Maybe you're always like this, and that's some indication of why Samuel did what he did. I don't know. But I don't want you going off half-cocked and hurting someone on my watch. I'm going to need you to keep it contained while you're out here, Officer.'

'I'm going to need *you* to call a dentist.' I put my legs down, leaned in to his face. 'Because the next time you talk to me like that, I'm gonna kick you in the mouth.'

We watched each other. Only Snale drew our eyes away, approaching the car, her notebook still in hand.

'We've got our first lead,' she announced. 'A suspect. It's not good news.'

Chapter 17

A GROUP OF men in Akubras had assembled by the edge of the road, talking animatedly, now and then pointing towards the town. Angry, and unable to look at each other. This didn't bode well. Snale had managed to rein in her grief but she had the sunken look of someone who had much crying to do yet. She stood beside the passenger-side door with Kash, looking in on me.

'Chief Campbell retired about six months ago,' Snale explained to me. 'I'm the only cop on active duty in the town. It was a long handover, and sometimes Soupy would help me out if I needed it. He got special approval to keep his handgun and cuffs for that very reason. Everything's been fine. You know, the usual sort of stuff. Drink-driving is my main problem around here. But I have been having some troubles with this kid named Zac Taby and his little crew of misfits.'

'How old's Taby?' I asked.

'Fifteen,' Snale said. 'One of our senior students.'

'You guys have got your own school down there?' I looked at the tiny town below us. It hardly seemed to have enough buildings.

'Of the town's seventy-five residents, twelve are kids,' Snale said. 'There's a little schoolhouse behind the post office. Two teachers. Five seniors and seven juniors.'

'And those guys reckon this Taby kid's written the diary?' I said. 'Makes sense. The book's full of praise for idiot teens. So they think they're looking for an idiot teen. Who are they, anyway?'

'They're just local farmers,' Snale glanced back at them. 'They say they've seen Taby around the junkyard over in Tibooburra playing with engine parts. He's basically everybody's first suspect when anything happens around here. I have questioned Zac but I wasn't convinced he had anything to do with the diary.'

'What made you so sure?'

Snale shrugged. 'He's been in and out of the station a lot, and I've always had him write statements of what's occurred. Zac hates writing. Why would he spend hours upon hours constructing a handwritten diary?'

'If a kid's interested in something, they'll put in the effort,' I said.

'What's Taby's religious background?' Kash asked.

'Oh, I'm not sure. If you want to go to church around here you've got to drive all the way to Fowlers Gap. That's Catholic. There are no

mosques out here.'

'So he might be Muslim?' Kash had perked up, like a dog catching a scent.

'I don't know.' Snale shrugged again. 'He's Pakistani. His is the only non-white family in the valley. People have always given the Taby family a hard time. Problem isn't just whether the Taby kid is responsible for this. It's that people *think* he is.'

'What do you mean?'

'Once things get reported as fact in small towns, they remain fact. And people decide facts for themselves out here. There was a rape over in the next town last year. Everybody decided it was the local plumber who did it. He had an alibi and everything, and the DNA didn't match. But once people had decided, that was it. They ran him out of town.' Snale already looked stressed. She walked back towards the men on the side of the road.

Kash beckoned for the diary on the seat beside me.

'Probably better give me that,' he said. 'It'll be safer in my custody. I'll do an analysis of the content and draw up a report.'

I didn't move to hand him the diary. He raised an eyebrow, his hand out, waiting.

'I'm not playing this game,' I said.

'What game?'

'This one.' I pointed to his chest, mine. 'This territorial crap. This stupid dance, where you tell me to step off, wave your dick around, puff your chest out. That shit doesn't work on me.'

'It doesn't?'

'Nope,' I said. 'And I'll tell you why. I'm looking at you and I'm guessing you're about ... what? Thirty years old?'

'I'm thirty-three.'

'Right.' I nodded. 'I'm thirty-six. My brother and I were removed from my mother's care when I was two years old. She was a prostitute. A drug addict. I spent sixteen years in foster care,' I said, watching his face. 'I don't know how many homes we were shuffled through. Sometimes Sam and I were together. Sometimes we were apart. We never stayed anywhere for more than a year. But in each and every family, the kids would tell me the same thing as soon as I arrived. *This is my house. Those are my parents. You don't touch my toys. You don't hug my mum. You don't belong here.*'

Kash's defiant frown had softened a little, if only with confusion at my candidness. I leaned forwards so that he could see that I meant every word I was saying.

'People have been telling me to fuck off out of their territory since before you were born,' I said. 'And for all those years, my answer's been exactly the same.'

He waited.

‘This is my house now,’ I said.

Chapter 18

WHITT SQUEEZED ALONG the packed aisle and settled near the middle of the row of spectator seats to the left of the courtroom. Above him, the press gallery was all looking at their phones, updating their editors before the morning's session began.

As Harriet's brother was escorted into the huge space in his crumpled suit, a hush fell over the crowd. Whitt tried to catch the man's eye, but Sam's stare was on the back of the courtroom.

Today, expert witnesses would testify about Sam's mental capabilities. The frail, big-nosed Doctor Hemsill had taken the stand, and avoided eye contact with Blue as he read from his report.

'We can infer that much of Samuel Blue's troubling history is directly attributable to developmental issues caused by his mother's use of illicit substances during her pregnancy,' Hemsill said. 'His tests show low patterns of stimuli reaction in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, which we know are areas of the brain affected by substance abuse in utero. The prefrontal cortex controls a lot of our civilising, inhibiting behaviour. It's what stops you lashing out or acting violently, for example, when you're experiencing rage.'

Whitt thought about Harry as he made notes. The times he'd seen her kick down doors, throw things, charge forwards with her fists balled when the stress of her situation became too much. He tried to shake her out of his head.

'Impulsivity is something we see often with these kinds of brain activity patterns,' Doctor Hemsill sighed. 'Reactions to emotion, rather than logic. Blue's social abilities are also greatly hindered by his neurological patterns. He has trouble with empathy. He can be abrasive. Hard to relate to. He naturally finds it difficult making friends at all, but when he does make them, his loyalty endures beyond reason.'

Whitt had accidentally written 'Harry' instead of 'Sam' in his notes. He crossed out the name, but circled the word 'empathy', tapping his pen thoughtfully on the page. Harry shared her brother's wild, unpredictable personality. She was abrasive and hard to relate to. But she did not lack empathy. Whitt had spent a couple of weeks in the desert with her, watching her toss and turn in her sleep, watching her struggle under the almost physical weight of her worry for whomever the Bandya Mine killer would target next. She'd been broken-hearted after a spider in their cabin had been found unceremoniously

squished. She felt things for others. In fact, sometimes Whitt thought she felt them too keenly. She would take the crusades of others on as her own responsibility, fight for people who didn't want or didn't deserve it.

Whitt had lost himself in dreaming. He rubbed his eyes, looked around. At the end of his row, a man with a closely shaved head was sitting with his hands on his knees. Whitt didn't know what it was that drew his focus to this man. Perhaps it was his attentive presence in the distinctly sparse seating area reserved for supporters of the accused. Whitt and the man were alone on the bench, and the bench behind them was empty. But no, it was something more. Whitt realised that almost every set of eyes in the courtroom was focused on the large screen behind the witness stand, where Doctor Hemsill was pointing at parts of the human brain lit up with different colours.

But the shaven-headed man's eyes were on Samuel Blue. The man was not just staring; his gaze was *locked* on Blue, like a cat with its attention fixed on a bird. The hairs on Whitt's arms were beginning to stand on end. Something told him to commit this man's face to memory. He looked at the notebook before him. Perhaps he could make a sketch. He took up his pen. But when he turned back to examine the man again, he was gone.

Chapter 19

I SAT AT Snale's kitchen table with my head in my hands, listening to the officer rattling around the kitchen, scraping food together for her two city guests. It had been a long day, and when Snale showed us to our accommodation, my space a single fold-out bed at the end of her large enclosed porch, I felt the desire to fall into the sheets and bury my face in the pillow. It was a struggle to keep my mind on the diary that lay open in front of me. Snale came to the table with her notebook in her mouth and two wineglasses in her hands.

'Don't drink it all at once.' She put a glass down before me. 'Wine's expensive out here. They only do a supply run every two weeks.'

Without warning there came a grunting, scraping sound. I almost spat out my first sip of wine when an enormous grey creature emerged into the narrow hall from the front room. The pig was at least a metre and a half long, covered in a fine black fur and a smattering of speckles. It trotted lazily into the room, looking me over with little interest.

I felt the first smile of the day crack my face. 'What the fuck?'

'Look,' Snale sighed, 'there are thirty-three adult men in this town. Thirty of them are married. One's seventy years old. And the other two aren't interested. It gets lonely out here.'

I laughed. 'You could have got a dog.'

We watched the enormous pig sprawl out on a blanket by the door, giving a long, guttural groan as it flopped onto its side.

'Jerry is a real presence in the house,' Snale said. 'His footsteps are heavy, and he snores really loud all night long. It feels like there's someone here.'

Kash finished a phone call and joined us.

Forensics had arrived that afternoon and completed a once-over of the diary for DNA and prints, so we could touch it now. We'd also handed off the plain red backpack the book had been found in. The backpack looked new, and nothing else was in it. That was odd. Why not just carry the notebook by itself? Was the red backpack meant to attract attention from the roadside? Did the diarist want the book to be found?

I perused the pages quietly while Kash and Snale chatted. The writer had indeed done some extensive investigation of bomb-building options, focusing on explosives that could be made from everyday household objects. The idea seemed to emerge out of Dylan Klebold

and Eric Harris's failed attempts to blow up their school cafeteria with gas-bottle bombs before they went on their rampage.

'Let's get the handwriting analysed against all the handwriting samples we can collect from the town,' Snale suggested.

I made notes, a list of to-dos.

'So this is the preliminary breakdown of the Campbell scene from Forensics today?' I asked, pulling Snale's notebook towards me.

'Yes, classic propane bomb,' she said. 'Seems to the team that Theo would have been sitting with the gas bottle either between his legs or wedged under the chair when it went off. He was sitting facing the town.' She sighed long and deep. 'His wife, Olivia, is in tatters. Just beside herself.'

'Does she have any ideas about suspects?'

'She wasn't very coherent,' Snale said. 'Says Theo was over in the next town fixing a mate's roof – someone called David Lewis – and then was going to stay for dinner. When he didn't answer his phone she figured he must have stayed the night. I'll go back to her for suspects in a day, maybe. Give her time to get over the shock.'

'Let's go talk to David Lewis. See if Theo was acting weird.' 'Right.'

'Any sign of someone else at the crime scene?' Kash asked.

'Maybe,' Snale said. 'There were footprints. Smeary, hard to tell the tread, but looks like an ordinary old workboot. Size seven men's, nine women's. Looks like a person pacing back and forth not far from the blast site. But they can't really date the prints. Could have been a day or two before. Theo's service weapon is missing, so someone must have got hold of it, used it to coerce him into the chair.'

'Where did the chair come from?' Kash asked. 'Surely the killer didn't bring it with him.'

'There's a bunch of junk up there on both crests, on the roadsides in and out of town,' Snale said. 'Kids go up there and smoke and throw things off the cliffs. Every Saturday night I go and do a sweep through the bush there and down in the gully, make sure they're not doing anything too naughty. The chair was probably from one of their little campsites. The duct tape, I don't know.'

'Yes, the duct tape. Where were Theo's handcuffs?' I asked.

'I'd be surprised if he had them with him. Neither of us have ever really bothered with them,' Snale said. 'I haven't cuffed anyone in the ten years I've been out here. Things never really get that out of control. And I know every single person who lives here. There's nowhere to run, so why try to get away?'

I turned to Kash, who was staring at the wineglass in my hand. 'Propane bombs. Are they hard to make?'

'Not at all. They're the terrorist-in-training's favourite improvised explosive device,' he said. 'Simple design, easily obtainable

ingredients. Any idiot can make one. You get a gas bottle from a backyard barbecue, duct tape a can of petrol to the side of it. Take the cap off, put a wick in, light it up and run away. Boom.’ He threw his hands up.

‘So we could literally make one right now?’ I scoffed. ‘With Snale’s barbecue gas bottle?’

‘You could make a bunch of different bombs with stuff lying around here.’ Kash took out his mobile phone, showed it to me. ‘I could crack this open, find the wire that connects to the ringer, expose it so that it’ll spark. Dump it in a bottle of something. Make a call to it. There you go. Mobile phone-activated bomb.’

‘But where does a person get the knowledge to put these things together?’

‘The internet,’ Kash said.

‘Surely people send up red flags with your agency when they search for stuff like that,’ I said.

‘If every teenage boy in the country who ever searched for how to blow something up earned a file with ASIO, the department would cease to be operational.’ Kash was eyeing Snale now as she drank her wine. ‘We don’t identify terrorists by their Google searches. That’s amateur hour.’

‘Let’s get all the IP addresses in town anyway.’ I made a note. ‘Check everyone’s internet activity.’

‘Why Soupy?’ Snale’s lip quivered. She sipped her wine to cover it. ‘Why pick him? He was an absolute doll. Someone’s pacing back and forth. They’ve got him taped to a chair with a bomb between his legs. Facing the town. It’s a good view from up there. You can see everybody. All the houses.’

‘Everybody can see you, too,’ I said.

‘It’s very ... showy,’ Snale said. ‘A demonstration. Either for Theo or for us, down here. A spectacle. Only the timing wasn’t great. No one awake to see it. Was it a practice shot? Or was *Theo* the audience – was he supposed to see the town spread out before him just before he died?’

I liked Snale’s musings. I wanted her to continue, but Kash spoke up.

‘Look, I don’t mean to interrupt. But are we going to be making drinking a part of our ongoing investigative practice? Or is this a one-off drinking session?’

Snale and I looked at each other.

‘Don’t get me wrong. You’ve both had interesting lines of inquiry so far. But we’re shooting the breeze about this case over a bottle of red in a dining room like a bunch of old ladies.’

‘Would you like to move to the garage?’ I snorted. ‘Should we

appoint a chairman? Let me guess. It should be you.'

'There is a violent terrorist in this town.' Kash took the diary from in front of me and waved it in my face. 'Is the seriousness of the situation escaping you?'

'We are taking it seriously,' Snale huffed. 'We're just cooling off, that's all. It's been a long day. I had to go tell a woman her husband was blown to pieces all over a hillside today.'

'Well, I'm sorry.' He shrugged. 'I guess I'm just not on the same page as you two. When I was on assignment gathering intel in Afghanistan, I was seeing guys being blown to pieces all over hillsides every day. And it only toughened my resolve. I think we shouldn't drink on the job.' He got up and traipsed away into the living room. I let my eyes wander to the shell-shocked Sergeant Snale.

'That was hilarious.' I took a sip. 'I think my wine actually tastes better now.'

'Let's look through this diary.' She pulled the book towards her. 'We're going to catch this killer, with or without him.'

Chapter 20

MY SLEEP WAS thin. The diary had disturbed me deeply. There was a detailed profile of Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, who'd killed thirty-two people on campus in Blacksburg. Once again, the diarist had listed the elements of Cho's massacre plan they seemed to find useful for their study.

1. *Chained doors, trapping victims.*
2. *Made detailed manifesto video, so reasons would be known.*
3. *Low personal profile, maintained non-threatening reputation before attack.*

Cho had acted out of a seething rage, making a rambling video manifesto while kitted up for the massacre. His cap turned backwards, the sullen, dark-eyed young man talked about a fiery demise for his enemies. I lay in the dark, his words bouncing around my brain, visions of his victims running for their lives flashing against the backs of my eyelids.

I was starting to get a mental picture of the diarist. If he or she had decided these were the attributes of a successful killer, then surely they'd be putting these behaviours into place in the lead-up to their own plan, whatever it was. They'd be maintaining a low profile, keeping quiet and resisting the temptation to bring collaborators in on their mission. They'd be trying to obtain weapons without raising any eyebrows. It wouldn't be hard out here. Every farmer in the town would have a gun. It would only be a matter of amassing them on or just before the day, once the killer had worked out where they could all be found.

I tried to tell myself to sleep. Without sleep, I'd never catch this guy. I was drifting in and out when the sound of grunting broke through my consciousness. I thought at first it was the pig. I climbed off the end of the bed and went to the porch screen door. Kash was out there in the barren dirt yard, a barely visible black streak against the rise of the distant ridge. I pushed open the door, still mussed from sleep. He was shirtless. A rippling, sweat-glistening torso lit up as I switched on the backyard light.

'What the hell are you doing?'

He was jogging back from the end of the property. He ignored me, dropped and did ten seamless, perfect push-ups. The muscles in his triceps looked surgically carved.

‘Are you nuts?’ I continued. ‘It’s ... What time is it?’

‘It’s two am.’

‘Why are you working out at two in the morning?’

‘If you want to bring down the enemy, you’ve got to think like the enemy,’ he said. He’d huffed rhythmically through ten jumping jacks, dropped for more push-ups. ‘Think, act, live like them. This is a classic training regime used by the Taliban for their frontline fighters. They conduct sessions at early morning hours to train the brain out of its circadian rhythm. They can eat, sleep and access high levels of physical energy whenever they need to.’

I watched, bemused, as he took off again towards the back of the property. He sprinted back and dropped to complete a set of sit-ups.

‘You’re a bit of an addict of this stuff, aren’t you?’

‘What stuff?’

‘The terrorism gig.’

‘Don’t knock it just because you’re incapable of it.’ ‘Incapable of it?’

I squinted. ‘Of what, exactly?’

‘Of the lifestyle. Of the kind of commitment it takes to work in national-level human security. I mean, there’s a reason you’re a cop. You want to protect people. But if you were capable, surely you’d do it at *this* level.’ He gestured to himself with one arm as he did push-ups with the other. ‘Not *that* level.’ He pointed at me.

‘You know, I’ve met some colossal douchebags in my life, Kash. But you’re slowly climbing the ladder to number one.’

‘Number one,’ he mused. ‘Sounds like me.’

‘You’re not even doing those properly,’ I said. ‘Your chest is, like, ten centimetres off the ground.’

‘Is that a challenge?’ he asked.

‘I’m just saying, if you’re going to run around training like a lunatic in the middle of the night, there’s no point in doing a half-arsed job.’

‘A half-arsed job?’ He stopped working out for the first time since my arrival. ‘Are you serious?’

‘I don’t joke about push-ups.’

‘You wouldn’t last to the end of this workout,’ he said. ‘I guarantee it.’

‘Right,’ I snapped. I went back inside, slamming the door, dragging my bag from where it lay at the end of the bed to search for my shoes. Agent Kash had no idea what I could withstand. In a life like mine, full of darkness and pain, a tough workout was child’s play.

Chapter 21

THE WORKOUT WAS invigorating, my quiet exhilaration heightened when he announced ruefully that I'd completed it. My body screamed through dozens and dozens of burpees, joint-grinding squats and panicked sprints to the end of the yard and back. When I knew he was looking, I scratched my nose with one hand during the push-up sets, the other arm continuing on through the exercise with what I hoped looked like effortlessness. I finished drenched in sweat. There were no congratulations from my new partner. He trudged off towards the house in silence.

I sat in bed making a list, light beginning to creep under the curtains drawn closed around the glassed-in porch. The porch was creaky, and when Jerry the pig came out to join me at sunrise the whole thing rattled like an old wooden wagon. The huge animal stood snuffling at me for a while, its big brown eyes searching mine, then flopped to the floor by my bed with an exhausted sigh.

Snale was right. The snoring was oddly comforting. I lay on my side and watched the animal's ear flapping now and then as it dreamed. Its body warmth made my corner of the porch cosy. I fell asleep to thoughts of Sam's case.

I had so much that I wanted to do to help my brother, but all of it was out of my hands. There was so much evidence against Sam. Not least his confession.

I walked up behind her. I was quiet. I swept my arm around her neck, pulled her backwards towards my car ...

Sam confessed to all three murders. But less than an hour after leaving the interrogation room, he said the confession was coerced. I didn't want to believe that my own colleagues might have psychologically tortured my brother, exhausted him and threatened him until he simply surrendered. Maybe they'd beaten him. I'd been known to get a little rough with suspects myself, inside and outside the interrogation room.

But I also didn't want to believe that Sam was guilty. So I tried not to believe anything.

Marissa Haydon had disappeared from the university grounds, in a small car park behind the campus bar on a quiet Tuesday afternoon. My brother's credit card records showed he had been in the bar that same afternoon.

Elle Ramone had disappeared from a street three blocks away from

the university, in the residential area behind the main street of Newtown. Sam usually walked home that way at around the same time she had gone missing, from his graphic design business in Marrickville, where he worked the three days a week that he wasn't teaching.

Rosetta Poelar had disappeared from a side street off of Parramatta Road, near the university's veterinary science building. CCTV inside a bicycle shop captured Sam walking through the area just fifteen minutes before Rosetta was last seen.

Sam had been at the right place, at the right time, for all three abductions. Police had been watching him, and they didn't like what they saw. He was single. He was antisocial. He had a history of juvenile crime. If he was as violent as his sister when he lost control, he might be deadly. The task force had jumped in and made an arrest even if the evidence was flimsy. The media had been hounding them for progress. Even a false arrest at that point would have been *something*.

That night, things took a turn. The police had found worrying evidence inside Sam's apartment – some violent porn, a rape dungeon-style set-up in his back bedroom. Those things were circumstantial. There was no evidence of any of the girls at Sam's place, and no evidence of Sam on any of their bodies. But the prosecution could physically place him near all three abduction sites. What were the odds?

I woke from a sweaty half-slumber and slid my notebook out from under my pillow. I flipped through the crime scene photographs of the girls' bodies sprawled on the banks of the Georges River. I looked at the trees on the opposite bank, a blur of pale eucalypts in the photograph. Fine grey sand and murky brown water. This place meant something to the killer. What had it meant to us?

My childhood had been full of rivers, fields, national parks. Often, Sam and I found ourselves in large families with multiple foster children lumped together with biological children. When child services found a willing foster carer, someone who was reliable, they sent them as many kids as they could possibly handle. Sam and I, two moody, aggressive white kids, would become part of an odd collection of youngsters all under the care of one foster couple. With so many kids in tow, traditional means of entertainment were off the cards. Going to the movies was too expensive. The families would take us to parks, rivers and long, empty beaches. Sam and I had spent time at the Georges River, but that time hadn't been any more meaningful than it had been anywhere else. At least, it hadn't to me.

Maybe there were things about Sam I didn't know. We'd been separated now and then, sometimes for up to a year, when families

wouldn't take us both. Maybe there was another Sam, a brother grown out of those blank spaces in his life, the ones I hadn't witnessed.

An evil Sam.

Chapter 22

THERE WAS LITTLE to say to Kash and Snale when I arrived in the kitchen in the morning. Kash was reading the *Herald* on his iPad, a two-page spread about my brother.

‘We’ve got to go,’ I said, drawing on my cap.

As we started walking into town, Kash lagged behind us, talking on his phone. I eavesdropped on his conversation, trying to distract myself.

‘You can’t take that. I bought it. You – But, Tenacity, baby, let me talk for a second, will you?’

Tenacity. I’d heard that name before. When I first learned Tenacity Bridge’s name, I thought she’d probably had a mother who’d thought she was cool landing her daughter with a moniker people would cringe at for the rest of her life, like mine. My secret shame, ‘Jupiter’, was at least my middle name and not my first, and I’d been able to hide it for most of my life.

The Tenacity I knew had been a victim I met in my work in Sex Crimes. A young man named Alex Finton had climbed in through her bathroom window one night and sexually assaulted her in her bed. I wondered silently if the woman Kash was talking to on the phone was the same one. How many could there be?

I was drawn out of my daydream by the crowd gathered out the front of the town pub, squinting in the sunlight. They turned angry faces on Kash and me. A sneer twisted the lips of the nearest person. It was only then that I noticed almost all of them were carrying rifles.

‘There they are,’ said one man, advancing towards us.

Chapter 23

‘WE WANT TO know what the hell’s going on.’ The man jutted his chin at me, turned and sized up the much larger Agent Kash. ‘We’re hearing the whole bloody town’s about to be attacked, and we’re seeing Sydney’s sent exactly *two* coppers to protect us. This is bullshit!’

‘Whoa, hold up.’ Kash put a hand out. ‘I’m not a cop. I’m a trained federal agent specialising in counter-terrorism.’

‘Terrorism?’ The group glanced nervously at each other, shifted their rifles. ‘Is it a terrorist?’

‘No.’ I stepped between them. ‘There is nothing to suggest right now that –’

‘Them Muslims,’ someone seethed. ‘I knew it’d only be a matter of ti–’

I didn’t have the patience for this. I was about ready to snap when a man broke in to the group, short and pot-bellied with thinning ginger hair.

‘Let’s keep this under control, huh, Jace?’ He put a hand on the rifleman’s shoulder. ‘I’m sure these officers know what they’re doing.’ The man turned to me, offered a hand. ‘I’m John Destro. Everybody calls me Dez.’

‘Dez is the mayor,’ Snale told me.

The man laughed, showing teeth so straight and white they could have been dentures.

‘Well, technically Last Chance is too small to appoint a mayor. I call myself that but I don’t get the salary.’ He smiled warmly. ‘I run the post office. So I’m the most powerful guy in town.’

He gestured to a two-storey building diagonally across the road from where we stood. It occurred to me exactly how powerful a postmaster could be in a situation like this. He literally had a monopoly on the essentials of life out here – food, alcohol, tools, farming supplies. It paid to be nice to the people who controlled your supplies, particularly when it was a two-day drive to anywhere with a population above five hundred.

‘I’m here to help in any way that I can.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Thanks. You can start by telling everyone to put their guns away. There is no evidence of an imminent threat to the people of this town. And this many people running around with rifles and frayed nerves is going to get someone killed.’

I walked inside the pub, where the tables surrounding a large stage

were packed with people, some of them already halfway through breakfast beers beside plates of toast. There were people on the upper floor, arms hanging over the railing, watching. This is what people do in country towns when there's trouble: go to the local pub, gossip, get a hold on the situation, regardless of the work to be done that day. The place was the beating heart of the town. There was a sweaty bartender standing behind the long, polished counter, holding a pint of beer to his lips. The glass featured a brass nameplate with 'Mick the Prick' engraved on it. I guessed drinking on the job was acceptable here, at least.

I walked to the stage and thirty sets of eyes followed me. Literally half the population of the valley was here.

'My name is Detective Inspector Harriet Blue,' I said loudly. 'I'm from the Sydney Metro police department. I've got a few things to say.'

I drew a long breath. How many of these people would recognise me from the front page of yesterday's paper? Snale was watching me from the doorway, with 'Jace' and the hostile group of farmers.

'Last night, your former police chief Theo Campbell passed away,' I said. There was no rumble of voices, no gasps of surprise. 'We're still investigating the circumstances, and whether they are linked to the diary Sergeant Snale questioned you all about some days ago. At this stage there is no reason to believe that anyone else in town is under any further threat. I advise you to go about your business. Those people we want to question about the case will be contacted shortly. If you think you've got relevant information to share with us about Mr Campbell's death, or the diary, then please do so.'

I tried to leave the stage and almost ran right into the solid wall of human muscle that was Kash. My stomach sank.

'Ah, actually,' he shifted past me to the centre of the stage, 'it might be helpful, Detective Blue, for us to provide a deeper understanding of what information might be relevant.'

'What the fuck are you doing?' I whispered. He ignored me.

'My name is Special Agent Elliot Kash. I'm a highly trained counter-terrorism expert, specialising in Islamic terrorism and insurgency. I've spent years in Iraq and Afghanistan gathering surveillance and intel on lone-wolf and sleeper-cell development.'

The crowd stirred. The bartender slammed a pint glass down.

'Because of my specialist experience,' Kash said, 'I can tell you the kind of thing we're looking for. You need to keep an eye out for someone you know who's been acting strange lately. Maybe spending more time than usual on their own or on their computer. Ask yourself if someone in your household has gained a sudden interest in organised religion, particularly Islam, or if they've been making

aggressive political statements. Have they withdrawn from their circle of friends? Are they making or receiving private phone calls in the middle of the night? Hypervigilance is the key here, people. Be aware, and if you see something, say something.'

'Terrorists,' someone at the back murmured. 'I bloody knew it.'

'That Taby kid's always on that laptop,' someone else said. 'You see him around town with it. That's how they radicalise them. The internet. The videos. The chat rooms.'

I all but yanked Kash off the stage as he tried to wrap up. He seemed confused by my fury. I pushed him out the pub door and into the shade of the awning.

Chapter 24

‘YOU ARE GOING to panic the people of this town.’ I shoved his chest. ‘There is no evidence of organised terrorism in this case so far. *None!*’

‘Maybe not to your eyes,’ Kash said. ‘You don’t have the training, or the experience. This is how lone wolves operate. They hide out in small regional towns where their activities don’t raise suspicion, and they experiment, honing their skills, until they can move on to bigger targets.’

I tried to breathe evenly. Snale exited the pub, shoulders hunched, embarrassed by the public display of antagonism. I had to salvage this situation, if not for the case, for the town’s perception of city law enforcement. Threatening Kash, shouting at him, wasn’t working. His skull was too thick, trapping messages outside his tiny brain. I needed to be calm. Reason with him.

‘You know,’ I said, ‘my training is in Sex Crimes. I live it. I breathe it. I spend my every waking moment dealing with it. So when a victim or a witness comes to me and tells me their story, my natural instinct is to believe what I’ve been trained to believe – that a crime has occurred.’

‘I don’t see where this is going,’ Kash broke in. I took a moment to visualise myself punching him in the face, then closed my eyes and carried on.

‘But sometimes,’ I said slowly, ‘very rarely, a crime hasn’t occurred. Someone is lying, or they’re mistaken. I have to make sure that I approach every situation with an *open mind*, and look at the *evidence*, before I form any conclusions.’

‘So?’ Kash shrugged.

‘So you’ve assumed there’s a terrorist in this town without any evidence to support that. And worse, you’ve just warned these people to look out for someone acting strangely, who’s withdrawn, moody, and who gets phone calls late at night. You know who that sounds like? It sounds like every fucking teenager I’ve ever met.’

‘Radicalists often target teens,’ Kash said. ‘They’re usually already despondent, disenfranchised. Vulnerable to the ideas of terrorist organisations.’

I turned to Snale, who was watching Kash with the kind of confused awe reserved for audiences of the truly mad.

‘Find me Zac Taby,’ I said. ‘We need to get to him before someone else does.’

Chapter 25

I STOOD FUMING while Snale went back to the house to get the four-wheel drive. I couldn't so much as look at Kash, who was now talking to Mayor Dez, probably giving him a run-down of covert surveillance tactics in the rural environment. I was steadily becoming exhausted. It seemed the further I got from the city, my home, the harder it was to breathe. Already the midday sun was baking the air, making it feel like steam in my lungs. *Seven days*, I thought. *It's only seven days*.

I noticed the farmer, Jace, standing nearby when he spat on the ground. He was watching me from the shadows beneath his hat. All of him was browned by the relentless sun, black freckles and moles standing up on his arms like cracked pepper. He had a foot propped on the stone front step of the farming supply store next to the pub.

'Was there much of Soupy Campbell left?' he asked.

I considered the question. It was odd. Not only deeply inappropriate, but slightly voyeuristic, too.

'It was a terrible scene,' I said. 'I can't imagine why you'd want to know.'

'Well,' Jace said, shrugging, 'out here we have pretty simple beliefs about justice. The blackfellas, they have their ways. They'll have the elders sing to the spirits about you. Bring down some bad luck. Sometimes they'll have a ceremony. Spear you in the legs. Depends on what you done.'

He looked me up and down, as though assessing my life's worst deeds.

'Then there's the white man's bush justice,' he said. 'An eye for an eye. Sounds like Soupy's woman won't have much left to bury. Whoever did this, it should be the same for their family.'

'Look.' I let my head loll. 'That's very impressive and scary, and believe me, I understand your way of looking at things. I've encountered a number of predatory scumbags in my particular line of work who I'd have loved to torture slowly with a barbecue fork. But that's not the way the world works.'

I was mildly uncomfortable at my own words. I had, in my time, tracked down and beaten a couple of sex offenders who had escaped justice. I had relished in hearing that violent child-sex predators got the old 'Long Bay Welcome Tea' – a bucket of scalding water thrown over them on their first night in prison. That was the violent part of me. The beast inside. But this man didn't need encouragement to go

out and punish Theo Campbell's killer with his little band of sunburned cronies. The men I'd punished had endured full, fair trials. I'd known they were guilty. The farmer before me was itching for a suspect to hurt. And there was no way he was going to wait to make sure he had the right guy.

'Any suspects yet?' he asked, as if on cue.

'No. But if we find some, and anything happens to those suspects before we can get them locked up, I'll be looking at you.' I pointed at Jace's eyes. 'So take your white man's bush justice and fuck off.'

He laughed at my bravado, gave me another long visual assessment, his eyes wandering right down to my boots, back up to my face. I stood sweating in the sunlight as he wandered away.

Chapter 26

ZAC TABY WASN'T hard to find. Snale picked us up in her four-wheel drive and drove us, not to the school but away from the town. Along a dirt track that rattled the car windows almost out of their frames, we came to a shaded gully at the foot of a tall cliff face covered in spray-painted tags. I got out of the truck and stared at the peppering of cigarette butts at my feet. Somewhere in the shady brush someone was playing music, a whiny peal from phone speakers.

A large black-and-grey dog rushed to the car to intercept us, barking in a decidedly unfriendly manner. Its stride jangled with the string of Coke cans tied to its tail. Snale sighed, exasperated.

'Digger,' she snapped. 'Come here. Come *here*, girl.'

The dog gave up its vicious charade and allowed itself to be freed.

'Whose dog is that?'

'It's the town dog,' Snale ushered the dog up onto the back seat of the four-wheel drive. 'No one really owns her. Everybody feeds her. Which is probably why she's so fat.'

A stringy, dark-skinned teenager emerged from the brush. I noticed others scuttling off through the trees, a couple of girls and a tall, lanky young man in a huge black trench coat that was ridiculous in the heat. Zac must have known we'd come looking for him after hearing about Theo Campbell's death. There was laughter on the wind as the teens took the back route into the bush, a couple of defiant cries of 'Fuck the Po-lice!'

Zac had a practised surliness well beyond his fifteen years. I might have wondered what it took to become this angry at life so young, but I had been exactly the same kind of kid. I never slept. I smoked like a chimney. I swore at strangers and hung out in the wrong places. One of my foster dads had nicknamed me 'Bitch face' because he said I always looked like I wanted to scream at someone. This kid thought nobody cared about him, and he was probably right.

'You got some friends, Vicky?' the teen asked, eyeing Kash and me. 'That's a first.'

'We need you to come with us, Zac,' I said. 'We've got to get your parents so we can chat about an incident yesterday morning.'

'I'm not going anywhere.'

'Oh yes you are.'

'Suck my dick, bitch,' he snapped at me. 'I don't know anything about what happened yesterday. So you can go and annoy someone

else, because I ain't no terrorist, and I don't keep a diary. Diaries are for little girls.'

'We just want to talk,' Snale said. 'Maybe you can tell us something that will help. You and Soupy were ... well acquainted. You might know someone else who had a major grudge against him.'

'Whoever it was deserves a fucking medal.' Zac drew a cigarette packet out of his jeans. 'Dude was an A-grade fucktard. I heard the bomb blew his head right off. Is that true?'

'We don't have time for the tough-guy games.' I strode forwards. 'Get in the car.'

'Should I resist?' He jutted his chin at me, grabbed a handful of his junk. 'Would that be exciting for you?'

'That's it,' I heard Kash mutter as he came up behind me. He pushed me aside and grabbed Zac, slamming the kid into the dirt.

'Stop! Stop!'

Zac was squealing with terror, all his bravado gone. Kash had a knee in the kid's back and both hands in his pockets, scooping and dumping detritus on the ground around us: cigarettes, joints, condoms, a pocketknife, scraps of paper. Kash got the boy's phone and let Snale and I drag him off the wailing teen.

Zac rolled in the dirt. 'Fuck you! Fuck you, po-lice piece of shit!'

'Let's have a look,' Kash was saying, swiping through Zac's phone. 'Recent photos.'

'Stop, Kash.' I grabbed at him, just missed the phone. 'This is an illegal search. Anything you find on there is going to be tainted.'

'Says who?' He held me back with a massive arm, worked the screen with the thumb of his other hand. 'I see ... naked teen girls. I see kids sucking on bongs. What's this?' Kash showed me the phone screen. I glimpsed a mess of wires and tools and glass jars on a sprawling, cluttered table. 'Bomb-making in progress?'

'Give me the phone,' I told Kash. 'Or I'll take it from you.' He was trying to zoom in on the photographs, backing away from me. I gave Kash a few seconds to comply, then strode forward, lunged and grabbed the hand that held the phone. He was fast, catching my other wrist as I went for an open-handed slap to the side of his head. I dropped and hooked a leg around his, pulling him off balance. He let go of my wrist to save himself from hitting the dirt and I got my slap in, wrenching the phone from his fingers as he was distracted by the blow.

'Oh shit!' Zac was laughing, pointing at me. 'Bitch has got some moves!'

I threw the phone at the boy, who only barely caught it against his chest. 'Call me bitch one more time,' I seethed, 'I'll shove that phone so far up your arse you'll be able to Skype your spleen.'

Kash watched the teen run off into the bush. His face was slowly flushing with colour, one hand steadying himself against the ground.

‘That was a big mistake,’ he told me. ‘Assaulting a federal agent is a minimum two years’ prison.’

‘Conducting a search without a warrant is a serious service violation,’ I said. I was rolling up the sleeves of my shirt. ‘But neither of us is going to make a report.’

‘We’re not?’

‘No.’ I set my feet apart, cracked my knuckles. ‘We’re going to sort this out right here, *right now*.’

Chapter 27

‘OH, COME ON,’ Kash snorted, rising to his full height. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Harry.’ Snale put a hand on my arm. ‘This isn’t a good idea.’

‘Victoria, our special agent friend here thinks in very simple terms.’ I kept my eyes on Kash. ‘He’s not a complex man. He understands strength and weakness. Good and evil. Winning and losing. He needs to be shown that he isn’t the alpha dog here, and when he knows that he can fall the fuck into line.’

Already I could see Kash’s interest in my challenge piquing, the way it had the night before when I ragged on his workout. A smile was playing about the corners of his mouth.

‘I don’t hit women,’ Kash sneered. ‘So you can back down right now before you overexert yourself.’

‘You don’t have to hit me. You just have to pin me.’

‘And what exactly will that achieve?’ he asked.

‘Whoever gets their face pinned against the dirt loses all jurisdictional authority over this investigation.’

‘Oh, bullshit,’ Kash snorted. ‘I’m SAS–combat trained, sweetheart.’

‘Then this should be over quickly.’

‘I’m not involved in this.’ Snale backed off towards the truck, her head down.

‘I need you as a witness!’ I called.

‘So, what? I pin you against the dirt, and I’m the boss.’ Kash’s eyes wandered over my body, measuring, underestimating, the way everybody did. ‘And you’ll fully accept that. It’s my investigation to run from start to finish.’

‘It’s got to be the face.’

‘Right,’ Kash said. ‘I put your face in the dirt and your arse is mine.’

‘You put my face in that dirt and I will trawl this town for Islamic terrorists until the cows come home.’ I put my hand on my heart. ‘I will speak operational jargon so pompous and ridiculously over-official that not even you will be able to understand me.’

He didn’t even ask me what I wanted him to do if I won. The possibility never entered his mind. He rushed towards me, huge hands out, ready to break me.

Chapter 28

KASH FAKED LEFT, swept to my right and gathered me up in a chokehold, his hairy arm wrenching me backwards. I let him take me, pushed off the ground and rolled over him, shocking him with how fast I had him on his back.

We both twisted, righted, kicking red sand. His glasses had been knocked off. He ignored them. My heart swelled with a sick kind of joy. I liked to fight. I'd been fighting since I was a kid. Trying to claw some corner of existence for myself in houses where I was the cuckoo invading the nest.

Kash was eyeing me, trying to decide his next move. I didn't give him time to go on the offensive again. I rushed at him, caught his arm and tried to twist it as we danced in the dirt. He grabbed the back of my neck and shoved me downwards, using my own momentum as I'd used his. I was pinned on my back, the wind knocked out of me. Most people panic when they can't breathe in a fight. But I knew the air would slowly return. I kicked out and he overbalanced, fell on me. I shoved his jaw upwards.

Snale was watching us from the truck. I locked eyes with her, my neck and shoulders and arms on fire as the incredible weight of Kash's body came down upon me. She grimaced as Kash leaned on me. It was clear who she was rooting for.

I kicked again, got him in the hip. I twisted and scrambled out from beneath him, got him in my own chokehold, a knee in his spine. He stood and I went with him, absurdly hanging off him like a monkey trying to wrestle a bear. He tried to shake me off, gripping at my arms, but I locked my legs around his waist. And then he did what I hoped he'd do.

Kash sank to his knees and fell backwards, trying to crush me against the ground. I slid sideways before I could hit the dirt, let go of his neck and scooped up his arm. I wrenched it high against his back. He yowled, shocked by the sudden pain, and I shoved the back of his head down so that his cheek hit the red earth beneath us.

'Yes.' I stumbled off him, wiping sweat from my eyes. 'Yes. Yes. Yes!'

The giddy exhilaration of my win lifted the weight of the Last Chance case, of my brother's case, right off my shoulders in an instant. For a second I felt free. When I fought, I felt strong. I felt that I could take care of myself. I was a warrior.

Kash was dusting sand out of his ear when I came back to myself. Back to the shitty hole in the desert, the middle of nowhere, far from where I needed to be. My smile faltered, as with painful clarity a little voice in my head reminded me that though he was clearly an idiot, a stubborn and ignorant being, this man was supposed to be my partner. We were supposed to be working on this thing together.

I offered my hand to Kash, but he didn't take it. He gave me a hateful look and walked off towards the car.

Chapter 29

WHITT TURNED THE page of the psychologist's report before him, the clatter and crash of the prison visitors' centre pushed back in his mind until it was only a dull hum in his ears.

Beyond the plexiglas, a door opened at the end of the small corridor. Samuel Blue was shuffled to the chair before the detective. Whitt put the psychologist's report in his briefcase and pulled out his notebook and pen.

'How you going, Edward?' Sam gave a tired smile. The two had met in the courtroom briefly the day before, exchanged a phone call.

'Oh, you know. How are you? That's the more important question.'

'I really need that money you were talking about on the phone.' Sam leaned forwards so that his mouth was centimetres from the speaker holes in the glass. 'I'm hot property in here, and the only thing that's going to keep the other cons off my back is protection money. I've used up the cash Harry gave me.'

'Are you still receiving threats?' Whitt asked.

'Daily. Staff and inmates now.'

'Jesus.'

'Yeah,' Sam sniffed. 'I know the drill – Harry told me. Protection money in prison is a lifetime deal. You pay once, you have to keep paying. But I need to at least keep drip-feeding these guys some cash or I'm not going to survive to see the rest of the hearings.'

'I'll move some money into your account this afternoon.' Whitt made a note.

'I don't know how to fight.' Sam seemed distracted, rubbing his palms together hard. 'I'm a fucking graphic design expert. I haven't been in a scrap since I was a kid. Harry's the fighter.'

'I spoke to her this morning. She's desperate to get back here.'

'She should stay as far away as she can.' Sam locked eyes with Whitt. 'I never wanted her here in the first place. Whoever's doing this to me, they'll be after her next. Someone's got to want to see me suffer big-time to put this much effort into a frame-up. I'd suffer pretty badly if anything happened to Harry, right?'

Whitt tapped the side of his page thoughtfully with his pen. He worked through his words before he spoke. Tried to keep them diplomatic. Supportive.

'So you still think someone is framing you?'

'It's the only explanation,' Sam said. 'They went into my apartment.

They planted those things. Someone abducted those girls when I was in the same area. They must have been following me.'

'It's ...' Whitt cringed. 'It's a lot of effort to go to. To do this to you.'

'You're telling me, mate.'

'I mean, you have no idea who it is?'

'No clue.'

'How can someone be that angry at you, and you have no idea who they are?' Whitt asked. 'Whatever you did to them must have been a supreme betrayal to warrant this. Something really, really bad.'

Sam's lips twitched. Whitt could see a hidden anger flickering there, pulsing like a heat behind the man's eyes.

'You don't believe me?'

'I never said that.'

'Because Harry said you were on our side.'

'I'm on Harry's side,' Whitt swallowed hard. 'And Harry's on your side.'

'Right.' Sam nodded, his jaw ticking with barely contained fury. 'Well, mate, you're correct. Whoever is framing me has gone to an awful lot of effort. They must hate me really bad. And it would be ridiculous for me to have no idea what it was, *unless of course I never knew how angry they were in the first place.*'

'OK.' Whitt nodded. 'I see your point.'

'What if it's an ex-girlfriend?' Sam shrugged. 'Someone I broke up with, who I thought was OK, but who really wasn't? You know, people can get these crazy stalker women. What if, all these years, she's hated me for leaving her. And I never knew it. And the hate has just been festering and festering.'

'Hmm,' Whitt said.

'Imagine how many sick and twisted people I might have offended in my ordinary everyday life who I have no idea have harboured this ... this *vendetta* against me. I've had students over the years who have plagiarised assignments for my classes. They were expelled because I caught them out. Because I brought their work to the Dean, and he cancelled their enrolment.'

'Right.'

'There was a guy ...' Sam was almost rambling now, his eyes wandering over the scratched surface of the glass between them. 'Another applicant for the position at the university. Maybe he blames me for not getting that job. Maybe this goes back further than that. Maybe it goes all the way back to when I was a kid moving around in and out of care. What if someone got placed in a family, or *didn't* get placed in a family, because of me?'

'Sam -'

'What if -'

‘Sam, I think you’re winding yourself up now,’ Whitt said, touching the glass where the prisoner’s knuckles rested. ‘You’re right. If it’s a frame-up, it could be anyone. This person is sick. Why they’re doing it to you may not be as logical as we’re expecting it to be.’

Sam tapped his wrist on the table before him, making the cuffs clatter rhythmically on its surface. He was panting. On the edge of losing it completely. Whitt made notes in his notebook, glancing up now and then at the frightened man’s eyes. It was all very convincing, Whitt thought. If Sam’s distress wasn’t real, it sure was a good act.

Chapter 30

HE DIDN'T EVEN feel the impact. Whitt was walking across the darkened car park towards the elevator of his apartment building when suddenly it seemed that the lights went out. He only realised he'd been hit when he tried to move and felt the oily, wet surface of the asphalt beneath his face. He shifted and the pain in his head made itself known, a huge, thumping ache.

Terror sparked through him. He saw blood on the hand by his face, his own hand, numb. Whitt tried to rise and a voice stopped him.

'Not so fast,' a gravelly voice said. 'You'll make yourself yack.'

Whitt slid carefully into a sitting position, propped himself against the wall by the elevator. There was a man leaning against the bonnet of someone's car just metres away, a slice of pizza in one hand and a cardboard pizza box balancing on the flat of his other palm. Unkempt blond hair. A dusty leather jacket. Big boots. Whitt took the details in slowly, his mind refusing to come to full consciousness all at once.

He did, indeed, feel like 'yacking'. He felt the back of his skull tentatively with his fingers, noted the blood soaking his hair. His briefcase, wallet, phone, gun. It was all gone. He found his glasses and slipped them on.

'Did you do this?' Whitt asked.

'Heh! No. I'm not a fucking coward. I use my fists.'

'I was ... hit with something?'

'You been slocked,' the man said. 'Congratulations.'

The man rolled a lump of asphalt he'd been toying with under his enormous black boot across the space between them. It came to a stop near Whitt's knee. He picked up the chunk of rock and looked at it, dazed.

'Whoever it was that hit you, he was an ex-con.' The man took a bite of his pizza, chewed while he talked. 'You learn to slock a guy in prison. Back in the day, you'd do it with a padlock. In a sock. Hence, "slock". Plenty of locks around prisons. Makes a convenient, disposable weapon. Take your sock off, load it up, swing it up, over, and down on the guy's head. Dump the lock, put your sock back on.'

'I see.'

'You know any ex-cons?'

'Just current ones.' Whitt dragged himself to his feet. 'I didn't catch your name.'

'Tox Barnes.'

‘Tox?’ Whitt squinted.

‘Yup.’

‘I’m –’

‘Edward Whittacker. You’re the reason I’m here. I expected to find you upstairs in your apartment, sippin’ a chardonnay or browsing an IKEA catalogue or some shit. Nope. Looked in the windows there and saw you face-planted on the garage floor. Who’d have thought.’

Whitt struggled to comprehend. One minute, he’d been walking from his car to the elevator, dreaming of home, worn out from the day in court, visiting Sam in prison. Now a strange, dishevelled man was schooling him on prison fight tactics. Whitt dragged himself up. He reached for his phone. Remembered it was gone.

‘I’m with Harry,’ Tox said.

‘Oh.’ Whitt watched the man finish the crust of his pizza, then chuck the empty box on the floor of the garage with a soft *whump*.

‘Yup. I’m here to help out with the thing with her brother.’

‘Oh,’ Whitt said again.

‘So, you’re on your feet.’ Tox looked his new partner up and down. ‘Let’s roll.’

Chapter 31

IT WAS A long, awkward ride back into town, Kash in the front seat, me in the back. Snale tried to make light, cheerful conversation to cover the silence. The dog sat staring at me as though my pockets might be full of treats, a long string of drool hanging from her tongue. She started barking as we came into sight of the town.

‘Oh, shit,’ Snale said as we pulled in to the main street.

At the end of the row of ten stores, comprising the entirety of the town centre, was the tiny police station. It was crowded with people. The gun-slinging group from the front of the pub had Zac Taby bailed up against the front doors. Digger and I jumped from the car before Snale had time to shut the engine off.

The dog ran towards the group, its tail wagging so hard her hindquarters were swaying back and forth. It certainly was a friendly thing. I could see why the town was so attached to it.

‘We’ve had enough!’ A man had Zac by the front of his T-shirt, pushing him into the glass. ‘You’re going home to pack your shit, and then you’re outta here.’

‘Murderer!’ someone cried. ‘Terrorist!’

‘Break it up!’ I pushed the men aside. ‘I will arrest the lot of you if I have to. Back the fuck up.’

One of the farmers pointed a gnarled finger at Zac. ‘He’s murdered our police chief. If you let him keep going, him and his kind will kill us all.’

‘He’s dangerous,’ a woman said. Suddenly the number of people around me had doubled. ‘We want him out of our town. We know he’s behind this.’

‘You don’t know shit, bitch,’ Zac spat in the dirt. ‘Suck my fat di-’

‘That’s enough from you.’ I shoved Zac into the police station. He stumbled deliberately against the front counter, clutching his elbow. ‘Argh! My arm! Police brutality!’

‘You are going to see some brutality in a minute.’ I frog-marched the boy through the empty station and into the interview room. Zac flopped into the chair, sunk low, so that his head looked straight across the tabletop, his legs spread beneath its surface. Snale and Kash shut the doors on the crowd and followed me into the darkened room, flipping on lights.

Kash leaned on the table, taking up most of its space with his huge arms, forcing Zac to back off into his chair.

‘You probably deleted all those photos,’ Kash said. ‘But they’ll be easy enough to get back.’

‘No shit,’ Zac said.

‘You’re in a real mess, boy-o. Tell me about those pictures.’

‘These ones?’ Zac took out his phone and swiped through the photos Kash had talked about at the gully. Naked girls. Kids at a party, huffing dope. ‘I didn’t delete them. I’m not an idiot, dude. I know you can get them back. That’s my ex-girlfriend. Those are her tits. You want a closer look?’

He shoved the phone at Kash’s face. I took the phone from between them, looked through the pictures.

‘She’s eighteen. I like older women, and they like me.’ Zac winked in my direction. ‘And for all you know, those bongos are full of green tea. Try to prove otherwise. I fucking dare you.’

‘I bet those joints we pulled out of your pockets aren’t full of green tea.’

‘You came all the way to this shithole to charge me with possession of weed?’ Zac sneered. ‘What a bunch of pretenders.’

‘The picture that concerns us is this one,’ I said, finding the picture among the collection.

The photograph was of a cluttered table in the middle of a dark shed. Tools, wires, buckets of screws and nails. In the background, a rusty gas bottle sitting on a shelf.

‘That’s my mate’s dad’s shed,’ Zac said lazily. ‘We build shit in there when we’re bored. That lump of metal in the middle of the table is a half-built go-cart.’

‘You ever built anything that goes bang?’ I asked.

Zac didn’t answer, stared at his fingernails.

‘There was a spate of low-level mischief involving explosives about two years ago,’ Snale sighed from where she stood in the doorway. ‘A student teacher doing his internship came out to Last Chance Valley in the second school term. He was being supervised by one of our teachers, Greg Harvey, but one morning Greg let the intern take the class by himself. The young teacher thought he’d endear himself to the kids. It was a science class. He taught them about different types of explosives.’

‘Oh, great,’ I said. Kash and I looked at each other.

‘It was nothing as complex as what we saw up on the hillside,’ Snale said. ‘So it sort of slipped my mind until now. He taught them about gunpowder, basically. How to make their own fire-works. So some of the kids got together and made their own mini-firecrackers.’

‘Bungers,’ Zac said. ‘You can make them as small as a cigarette. About two seconds’ fuse. Chuck them at old ladies. Fuckin’ hilarious.’

‘Not you, though. You wouldn’t do anything like that.’ I rolled my

eyes.

‘No, no. Not me.’

‘How many kids were in that class?’ I asked. ‘The one about explosives.’

‘Bout five of us.’ Zac smiled, sat giggling to himself, the only sound in the room as Snale, Kash and I quietly despaired about the four other kids we now had to interview. Kash slapped the table soon enough, shutting Zac up instantly.

‘This is all very hilarious, I’m sure, but the number one suspect as far as the rest of the town is concerned is you, mate,’ he said. ‘I’ve worked in villages outside Johannesburg where suspicion of a serious crime is all it takes to get you dragged into the bush and hung from a tree.’

‘I’ve worked in villages outside Johannesburg ...’ Zac waved his hands, his voice a buffoonish imitation. ‘Dude, you’re such a try-hard. You’re not impressing anyone.’

Kash looked like he wanted to leap across the table and strangle the kid. But he met my eye and I shook my head. I was in charge now. If we were going to do any roughhousing of the suspects, it was my call. And if we spent too much time knocking innocent people around, the people of this town would clam up on us. Small towns were full of secrets, and if we became their enemy, they’d hide the killer in their midst just to spite us.

Chapter 32

KASH WALKED OUT of the interview room, veins beginning to creep up from beneath the skin near his sweaty temples. Snale followed. I went to sit in the chair Kash had vacated and put my feet up on the table.

‘Is that tosser your partner?’ Zac asked.

‘At the moment.’ I took an intake form from beside the recorder and tossed a pen at the kid. ‘Fill in this form.’ I would take the paper and compare Zac’s handwriting against the diarist’s. The kid sighed and began writing.

‘So that guy’s your boyfriend, then,’ he said eventually.

‘Certainly not.’

‘I thought that was the whole deal, though,’ he snorted. ‘When dude and lady cops work together they get into dangerous situations. Have to save each other’s lives. Then they *fuck*.’

‘I’m no lady,’ I told the kid. ‘And you should be less concerned with who’s fucking who and more concerned about the townsfolk lynching you the moment they get a chance.’

‘The townspeople can blow me.’ He sat back in his chair. This kid had a real fascination with fellatio. ‘You ask me, it’s the Old Man you lot should be looking at.’

‘Who’s the old man?’

‘The dude,’ he waved vaguely behind him, in a westerly direction, ‘I don’t know his name. Us kids just call him the Old Man. He lives out there in the never-never. His people and Dez’s people had some drama back in the day, when Last Chance was first settled. He won’t be friendly, join the town. But won’t fuck off, either. You’ll know him when you see him. He’s scary and old.’

‘Scary and old,’ I said. ‘Right. I’ll make a note of it. Until then you’re going to have to stay low. People around here want your blood.’

‘What else is new? Everything around here falls on me. You get used to it. I’m too big for this joint. They won’t know who to pin shit on when I bust outta here.’

‘You’ve got plans to leave?’

‘End of the term, I can legally leave school,’ he said. ‘I’m getting out of here and I’m *never* coming back. I don’t care if I have to work at a McDonald’s and sleep under a bridge. You’ve gotta start somewhere, man.’

‘Is that what people do?’ I asked. ‘Take off as soon as they get the chance?’

‘No way.’ He put his arms behind his head. ‘Around here you take over your family farms or you go work for the mines and send your money back here. That’s the only reason people have kids in this town – because if they don’t, their farms will close down. If everybody leaves, the whole town closes down, so anyone who makes plans to go hasta keep it secret or people will start calling you a traitor, talking about how you’re abandoning the place. It’s supposed to be one for all, all for one. So people keep having kids, and their kids take over the farms, and then *they* have kids. It’s an endless, meaningless cycle of bullshit.’

‘So what happens if you’re a kid around here and you don’t want to be a farmer?’

He made a gun with his fingers, put it to his head. ‘Bang!’ ‘Don’t they try going into the cities?’

‘How are you gonna leave and start again in the big city when you grew up your whole life in a hole in the Earth? You got no money. No friends. No family backing you. No work experience. You don’t know the city ways. You try to climb out, it just sucks you back in.’

‘But you’re not going to get sucked back in.’

‘No way.’ He stretched, reached for the ceiling. ‘I’ve got a plan.’

‘Oh yeah? What’s that?’

‘None of your business.’

He settled back in his chair and knitted his fingers over his skinny chest like he was planning on going to sleep. I knew that kind of calm. The emotionless resolve that comes with knowing you’ve reached rock bottom, that there’s no more trouble that you can get into. No expectations. Maximum ostracism. I’d been that kind of teenager. Wandering around the city at night on my own, spray-painting trains, breaking windows, lighting rubbish bins on fire.

It was actually while I was sitting in a holding cell at Maroubra Police Station, listening to the goings-on in the office, that I’d found my calling. An old lady had wandered in bleeding after being knocked down only a couple of blocks away, her handbag stolen. I’d watched through the bars as two female officers brought her to a chair by one of the desks, tended to her, soothed her, made her a cup of tea. They were like two daughters caring for their frightened, befuddled mother. And the old lady’s eyes wandered over their immaculate blue uniforms, their faces, with awe and joy. I’d imagined someone looking at me like that one day. Like I was their hero.

Zac Taby needed to decide how he wanted to be looked at. Right now it was only me looking at him, seeing myself. But I knew what he was in the eyes of the people here. Their runt. The enemy in their midst.

‘You’re going to go home and stay there,’ I said. I shoved the kid’s

phone back towards him. 'Play Xbox or something until this whole thing blows over. If I hear or see you around town before I leave, I'll kick your arse.'

The kid took his phone and gave a dismissive laugh. He didn't know how serious I was.

Chapter 33

THERE WAS A slender, beautiful Pakistani woman standing in the police station's main room with Snale and Kash when I emerged, shutting Zac in the interview room to cool his heels. Zac's mother. Kash still had his interrogation stance on, arms folded and head bowed, eyes narrowed as he took in her face, her figure, as though he could see cruel intentions written on her very countenance. I didn't see anything but a worried, tired woman fed up with her son's antics.

'Is he in there?' She pointed towards the door as I closed it. 'I am going to absolutely nail that kid.'

I laughed. Her words were much feistier than her appearance.

'Your son hasn't done anything wrong, Mrs Taby,' I said. 'Not lately, anyway. Not that we can see.'

'Yeah, not that anyone can see,' she scoffed. 'Half the trouble he gets into, I only hear about it three weeks later when someone makes some snide remark to me about their dead cat or their burned-out shed. He didn't kill Mr Campbell, Officer, but I can tell you he hasn't been out there collecting funds for charity. I haven't seen him in three days. He needs a smack on the behind.'

'Well, after you've smacked his behind, we'd appreciate it if you locked him up for a couple of days,' I said. 'Just until everything settles down.'

'Where is Mr Taby?' Kash said.

'Mr Taby doesn't have time to be running around after our little monster.' Zac's mother rolled her eyes. 'He works remotely for Ektor Corp. His hours are strange. He has to be up all night sometimes talking to his divisional partners. He's locked to that computer sixteen hours a day.'

'Ektor Corp.' Kash nodded. 'Huh.'

'Your son's in a lot of trouble, Mrs Taby,' I said. 'We're going to need you to keep an eye on him. There are people in this town who would just love to get their hands on him.'

'They'll have to wait till I'm done with him first,' she said, marching towards the interview room.

Chapter 34

‘I REALLY THINK I ought to seek medical attention.’ Whitt touched the back of his skull tenderly as he sat at the bar Tox had taken him to, looking at the blood on his fingertips. Tox put two shots of Scotch on the counter before them.

‘I hate working with people,’ Tox said. ‘Don’t make me work with a pussy.’

Whitt drank the Scotch greedily. His mouth was dry, his nerves rattled. And this ‘Tox’ person was doing little to settle his apprehension. Nothing about the man he was sitting beside convinced him that he was as he said: an active police officer, someone who had worked by Harry’s side on a major case.

‘Harry has been responsible for most of the hard work on Sam’s case,’ Whitt said. ‘In my briefcase, I had a copy of her notes. Whoever hit me might have been someone working for the press. Someone looking for fresh story angles on Sam’s case.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Tox grumbled. ‘I think it was whoever framed Sam, trying to get ahead of our game. Trying to know what we know.’

‘So you think this whole thing is a frame-up, too?’

‘Yep.’

‘But why on Earth would someone do this?’ Whitt shifted closer, intrigued. ‘Kill three innocent girls, just to get revenge against Sam?’

‘Whoever this is, they were going to kill those girls anyway.’ Tox waved a dismissive hand. ‘All three girls were the same type. White, young, ambitious brunettes. No, that was someone’s fantasy. It was ritualised. Same kill technique. Same dumping ground. Whoever murdered those girls, he’s done it before.’

‘That doesn’t fit Sam Blue.’ Whitt sipped his Scotch. ‘He’s got a record, but none of it’s violent or sexual. Petty theft and drug charges in his teens. He’s been good as gold for a decade at least.’

‘Mmm-hmm,’ Tox grumbled. ‘But Harry’s got the violent streak, so the public will assume Sam’s just better at hiding his.’

The two men watched their drinks.

‘You ask me,’ Tox said, ‘we’re looking at two possibilities. The killer has decided to pin his crimes on someone, and he’s chosen Sam Blue, whether it’s for vengeance or whatever the hell. That, or the police investigating the killings have decided they need a patsy, and Sam Blue’s it.’

‘The police?’ Whitt scoffed. ‘Now you’ve lost me.’

‘You know the guys on the task force? Nigel Spader and his team?’

‘No,’ Whitt said.

‘I knew them way back when. In the academy. They’re cowboys. I got a bit of a history, myself.’ He glanced at Whitt. ‘You’ll learn about it soon enough. So I’ve seen these guys with their claws out. It might be that they came upon Sam by accident. It might be that they’ve got some beef with Harriet, and her brother naturally made a great suspect.’

Whitt sighed. ‘What the hell are we going to do to clear this up?’

‘From my understanding, Harry’s been working on the girls, checking out their autopsies, the crime scenes, their abductions, trying to look for clues there. I reckon we find out what’s happened with this Caitlyn McBeal girl. Find out what Linny Simpson’s final version of events is. Where is Caitlyn? Why isn’t she answering her phone or accessing her accounts? It’s weird. And the police reaction to it is even weirder. The cops just don’t want to admit something’s wrong there because it fucks with their Sam Blue theory.’

‘OK.’ Whitt sat up. He felt tingles of exhilaration rush through him. Hope. Dangerous hope. ‘We can do that. We can find her.’

‘Don’t get too excited.’ Tox sipped his drink. ‘We want to find her alive. We find her dead and all we’ve got is more unanswered questions.’

Chapter 35

‘THE VIDEO CAMERA they found at Sam’s. That’s weird, too,’ Tox mused.

‘It is,’ Whitt agreed. ‘The task force found the camera just sitting there at the end of the bed on a tripod. No files on it. Totally blank. And there isn’t a single fingerprint on it, or trace of DNA. How does the guy use the thing for a prolonged period of time without leaving a trace of himself on it? It didn’t have *anyone’s* prints on it. It had been wiped clean. Why wipe your prints off it if you’re just going to leave it sitting in your apartment?’

‘It’s a prop,’ Tox said. ‘It’s been planted. For sure. The magazines, too.’

‘And where are the video files?’ Whitt shrugged. ‘Nothing was found on either of Sam’s computers at home. Nothing on his work computer. Why take all the time to record your deeds and then destroy the files?’

The two men considered the glasses on the countertop some more.

Whitt fiddled with the gash in the back of his head. He wasn’t sure what would happen now. The man beside him looked tired, ragged, almost bored with the whole thing. But something told Whitt that he might be the kind of man who always looked that way, a sleepy old python not easily aroused into showing its fangs. Whitt wasn’t sure if this man was a police officer or a private investigator. He was itching to call Harriet and check out if he even was who he said he was.

‘It might be that we’re completely wrong about all this,’ Tox said. ‘Maybe there is evidence to convict Blue. Lack of prints, lack of DNA – it doesn’t mean they’re not there. It just means the Forensics guys haven’t found them. Maybe Blue wasn’t acting alone. And whoever he was acting with, that’s where all the pieces lie. That’s how it all fits together.’

‘What makes you think a partner might be involved?’

‘Look, it doesn’t make sense that Blue’s the killer and he left that evidence in the apartment the way it was,’ he said. ‘Innocent or guilty, Sam Blue did not leave a set-up like that on purpose. No way. Maybe Blue is innocent, and the whole thing has been planted on him by someone. Or maybe Blue is guilty, and he has a partner. And his partner knew the two of them were going to go down. He sacrificed Blue so he could go on killing. Make a fresh start.’

‘How would he have had time to plant the evidence?’ Whitt asked. ‘Surely Nigel’s team went straight to the apartment after arresting Blue on his way to work.’

‘Nope,’ Tox smirked. ‘They arrested Sam at eleven am. They didn’t get into the apartment until six that night. Nigel’s team. Bunch of excited schoolgirls. Everybody wanted to be in on the Blue interrogation. Only dragged themselves away when they started hitting a wall. Could be someone snuck into Blue’s apartment after the arrest but before the raid. I don’t know.’

Whitt thought about the shaven-headed man in court. The image of him suddenly popped into his mind, a flash. He dismissed it. His battered brain playing tricks, speculating.

‘Blue had scratches on him that the team photographed after the interrogation,’ Tox said. ‘Nigel tried to say they were from the girls trying to fight Blue off. But Blue was in that interrogation room for twenty-two hours. I reckon he might have copped them in there. No one photographed him at intake. That’s dodgy. We gotta figure out what’s going on here, one way or the other.’

‘I guess we’re looking at two very interesting possibilities,’ Whitt said. ‘Blue’s either completely innocent ...’

‘Or he’s a very dangerous psychopath,’ Tox said. ‘The kind who wears sheep’s clothing.’

Chapter 36

IT WAS MIDNIGHT. I sat at Snale's kitchen table, listening to the sound of Jerry's snoring coming from the room nearby. Photographs of Theo Campbell's various remaining body parts had been emailed through to us from the morgue in Orange. Was Theo Campbell's death indeed a part of some grander plan? Were there more bodies to come?

Kash had tried to convince me all evening that Adeel Taby, Zac's father, was a worthy avenue we needed to be looking into. Ektor Corp, the company he worked for, had its hands in oil and gas extraction in the Middle East, and there were rumours of the company's interest in arms dealership. I reminded him that I was in charge. We'd made a deal. Taby's parents didn't interest me as suspects.

I pressed open the diary again and touched the tiny, fluid handwriting, ran my fingers over the printed images of mass shooters glued onto the pages. The handwriting didn't look like Zac Taby's. But I wasn't an expert on that. The diarist and Zac shared a propensity to push overly hard on the paper, dent the pages, make it difficult to read the words in the left-hand side of every page.

The diarist had made a close analysis of the actions of Elliot Rodger, who'd killed six people and injured fourteen others on a rampage through Isla Vista, California. Rodger had stabbed his three housemates, then gone after young women in a sorority house nearby, punishing any women he could find for all the sexual rejection he'd faced in his life. The diarist's commentary was more critical of Rodger's killings than it had been for the other shooters. There was a list of 'mistakes' on the right-hand side of the page, under a map of the killer's route of terror through the city.

1. *Most victims random, not personal.*
2. *Undignified video confessional before shooting. Sounds desperate.*
3. *High-risk initiation – could have been caught after stabbing housemates.*

I made a note to check what sort of counselling services were available in the area, both to teens and adults, and what the levels of depression and suicide were in the region. The diarist seemed particularly interested in leaving a good-quality manifesto of their ideas and complaints, their reasons for doing what they were planning to do. They would only plan on doing that if they didn't see themselves being around to talk about those things in the aftermath.

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold attacking kids at their high school who had taunted them. Elliot Rodger attacking girls who had rejected him. I googled Seung-Hui Cho and watched excerpts of his video manifesto on YouTube.

You have vandalised my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option.

These young men weren't trying to inspire people. Each of them would kill themselves after their attacks. They wanted vengeance. It wasn't terrorism. It was payback.

I shifted my papers around, found my phone and looked through Whitt's email from earlier in the evening about meeting Tox. A tiny smile played about my lips. My heart had been aching to be home, and now I had a new reason to dream of myself there. The incomprehensible partnership of Whitt and Tox: a man who never went anywhere without a personal manicure kit, and a man who I'd seen walk around with blood all over his shirt for two straight days. Wherever the two went with the leads I had given Whitt, one of them would meticulously gather the tiny breadcrumbs of every possible scenario while the other walked ahead of him, kicking down doors and shoving people out of his partner's path.

When my phone rang, I expected it to be Whitt, but it was a number I didn't recognise. I walked out to the front porch and sat on the step looking at the stars.

'Harry,' a voice said. 'It's me.'

My heart twisted in my chest.

Chapter 37

THE LAST TIME I had seen my mother had been on the street corner outside my apartment in Pyrmont. Her hands had been wrapped in bandages, and her hair had been a thin, burgundy nightmare. A fresh tattoo on her neck. She'd wanted to live with me. I'd had to turn her away. She'd stayed overnight with me before, but I'd awakened to find all my valuables and cash gone and my front door wide open.

I didn't know what to say to her at first, now that she was on the phone. I had tried to contact our mother when Sam was first arrested, but she hadn't responded. I'd wondered if she was dead. There was not a centimetre of the Australian landscape that wasn't saturated with the media coverage of the Georges River Killer and his dramatic capture. I looked at the stars and sighed.

'Are you there?'

'Yes,' I said. 'How can I help you, Julia?'

'I wish you wouldn't call me Julia,' she said. 'It's bad manners.'

'Is there something that you need?'

'I don't need anything, baby. I'm calling to see how youse are. You and Sam.'

Why don't you take a guess?

'We're fine,' I lied. 'Was there something else?'

'I tried to go to the courthouse today, but I was too late. They'd shut the doors. I want to visit Sammy but I'm not on his visitors list. Can you get him to put me on?'

'You're not worried you'll be arrested as soon as you walk in the door?' I asked. 'You've still got warrants out.' My mother's crimes of choice were burglary and car theft. She was wanted in four states.

'I need to see him.'

'Well,' I sighed, 'you could give it a shot.'

'I've been crying for days and days,' she sniffed. 'It's been hard to contact youse both. After I saw the headlines, I was just fucking out of it. You know? I just lost it, mate. I went to bed and I pretty much haven't been up in months.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I can't believe this. Any of it. How has this happened?'

'That's what we're all trying to work out.'

'Well, I'm ready to do my part now, ay? I'm ready to help you both through this. It's the least I can do.' She drew a deep breath, allowing me to prepare myself for the grand show of generosity that was about

to come. 'They've asked me to do a spread in *Her Weekly*. It's paid. I want to donate some of that money to Sam's legal fees.'

'You ...' I felt heat rush up into my mouth. 'You what?'

'Some magazine lady called me. They want to do a four-page spread on my story. It'll be me and some photos of youse when youse were kids. Some stories about raising you both.'

I was speechless.

'They're offering forty thousand dollars,' she sniffed. 'So I thought, you know, five or ten grand of that could go to you and Sam, help out with the lawyer or whatever.'

'You can't do this,' I said. I was standing now, my mouth opening and closing, the words failing to come. 'You just ... can't, Julia. I mean, what the hell are you going to say? Sam and I ... we were practically toddlers when we left your care.'

'Harry, it's not like I didn't have any say into how youse were raised. I always knew where youse were. I called. I called dozens of times.'

I couldn't breathe.

'Harry, are you there?'

'Julia,' I said. 'Listen to me very carefully. *Her Weekly* isn't interested in how you raised us and what lovely children we were. They're not going to paint this as some beautiful tragic tale of a misunderstood woman and the perfect little angels who were stolen from her by evil Child Services. They're going to represent you as an irresponsible junkie and the two of us as institution rats with violent backgrounds.'

'No they're not.'

'Yes, they are.' I gave an angry laugh. 'Anything else would be a lie!'

She was silent. In the background of the call, I could hear a television playing, a man shouting.

'Julia, they're going to sit you down and wave money in your face and get you to confide in all the awful stuff you've done over the years. And then they're going to use that as evidence to suggest Sam is guilty.'

'Harry, my life is really hard right now. I don't expect you to understand, you being a fucking copper and all. You've been trained to hate people like me.'

'OK,' I said, 'I'm hanging up now.'

'I need that money, Harry. I'm going to use it to start again. I've met someone, and we're going to start a business together. This is the one, Harry. I can feel it. He's not like the others.'

I didn't say anything.

'I have always loved you, Harriet.' She gave a sharp, furious sigh. 'I have always loved your brother. Doesn't that count for anything?'

Jesus Christ, I don't know how you ended up such an ungrateful bitch. I'm doing my fucking best here.'

I hung up, gripped my hair. I wanted to howl into the night. It was like my brother was sinking in quicksand. Every time I thought someone was coming along to help me free him, they only kicked more sand at him. The more he struggled, the deeper he got. I knew if too many people joined the crowd trying to bury him, I'd never get Sam out alive.

Chapter 38

IN THE MORNING we paid a visit to Theo Campbell's friend David Lewis, to see what he thought about the former police chief's death. The younger man had seen Theo that afternoon, climbed the roof of his little farmhouse with him and accepted his help in fixing some broken tiles. Lewis had of course heard the news already and seemed bewildered. The last person to see the victim before a tragedy is often haunted by what has happened. David repeated words I'd heard often, that Theo had seemed fine, that he couldn't believe he watched his friend walk off so casually to what would be such a violent death.

The sun was high and blazing as we pulled in to the Campbell driveway. Olivia Campbell opened the door to us, her hands red from wringing and her eyes puffy. She had the reserved dignity of a cop's wife, her outfit put together and her hair neatly pulled into a tight bun. A woman who carried on in the face of adversity, at least in terms of appearance, someone who never let the cracks show. There was a framed wedding photograph of the two of them just inside the door. Theo was broad-shouldered, tall and bushy-browed. I went to the doors that looked out onto the backyard, watched the family cat as it toyed with a dead locust by the edge of the lawn.

'It's drugs,' Olivia said as she and Snale settled on the lounges. 'People are saying it's terrorism, or it's related to the diary they found. But I'm telling you, it's some drug gang that's got him.'

Snale and I exchanged glances, shocked. I didn't know what I'd expected. Some small talk about Theo, about how Olivia was coping. But she launched straight in. Kash looked sceptical. He stood at the bookcase, looking over the tattered paperbacks there. He zeroed in on a copy of the Qur'an like a hawk and seized it from the third shelf, as though he'd find the answer to Theo's demise there.

'What do you mean, drugs?' Snale asked gently. 'We're on top of the drug situation in the region. We don't have any gangs out here.'

'Theo said was running an undercover sting,' Olivia explained. 'See, we went to bed one night, maybe a month ago, and I woke up at around midnight and Theo wasn't beside me. I went to the front windows and looked out. I saw him talking to Jace Robit and his crew. I asked him what was going on when he came back inside. He wouldn't tell me much about it. He said he thought there was drug activity going on. Ice production.'

Snale shook her head ruefully, disbelieving. I came and settled on

the edge of the couch.

‘There is ice around here,’ Snale told me. ‘Softer drugs, too. Lots of weed. But any amphetamines are mostly brought through by the truckers heading to Bourke, about four hours out. Bigger town. People buy it at one of the local pubs there, we think, to keep themselves running until the next round comes through.’

‘It’s only small amounts?’

‘The kids use it recreationally. They’re bored. There’s nothing to do out here. We’d know if anyone in town was manufacturing it. Something like that would be difficult to hide. And there’d be no point in making it. You wouldn’t be able to sell huge amounts of it out here. Ice is made in the cities, where you’ve got a chance of blending in.’

I remembered the wonky-toothed, narrow-bodied man with the rifle, Jace. His little gathering of similarly sun-worn types.

‘Robit has a cattle property on the south side of the valley.’ Snale pointed.

‘Was Theo sure it was drugs they were manufacturing?’ Kash asked Olivia, who looked up, red-eyed. ‘Or was he just suspicious?’

‘I don’t know.’ Olivia wiped her nose on a well-used tissue. ‘I only saw them that one night, and I didn’t ask for any more details. I remember them all standing out there on the road. Their headlights were all on. The forensic officers, they told me that whoever killed Theo had been pacing around near him. Had him tied to a chair.’ She fought back tears. ‘Maybe it was some sort of interrogation, see whether he’d told anyone else.’

I wandered into the office while Snale comforted Olivia. This was obviously Theo’s domain. There was a cracked leather desk-chair and an old, dusty laptop, a collection of brass nautical navigation equipment on the desk in desperate need of a polish, more books. I went and sat in Theo’s chair, looked out the window onto the bare lawn. There were papers on his desk. A half-finished memoir of a rural police chief’s life. Zac Taby had said that diaries were for little girls, but Theo Campbell had spent hours upon hours reflecting on his long career, setting down his personal history in these pages. I flipped through and caught the occasional word. *Honour. Evidence. Tragedy. Arrest.*

‘He would have told Snale about an undercover operation,’ Kash whispered from the doorway. He was still holding the Qur’an like a much-loved teddy. I watched him go to the bookshelves here.

‘I agree,’ I said. ‘If farmers were making ice out here, there’d be no need to run an undercover sting. Just go raid their properties. Ice manufacture is expensive. Complicated. And it reeks. How on Earth would they hide the smell? Besides that, there isn’t a big enough market for it out here. I can understand how the truckers get away

with it. Some city drug dealer gives them a package and they slowly sell it off, town by town, all the way across the country. But cooking it out here? It would be stupid.'

'It might have been a one-off,' Kash mused. 'Make one big batch, take it to the city, sell it and make a fortune. Pay off your debts. Theo found out and was trying to talk them down, so they killed him.'

'And the diary?'

Kash stared at his feet.

'Maybe it was a decoy,' he said.

I hadn't thought about that. That someone might have constructed the diary to throw us off. It wouldn't be hard. A few late evenings sketching, doodling, noting down tidbits from what was perhaps a passing interest in spree killers. Maybe the diary had nothing to do with Theo Campbell's death. Maybe his was a straight-up drug-related killing.

A guilty little zing of excitement ran through me. If I could wrap this case up as quickly as that, I could go home to Sydney. Sure, I wouldn't be allowed anywhere near my brother or the courthouse, but I would at least be closer to him. All of that was calling me. Conduct a raid on Robit's place. Find something. Anything. Lock up him and his cronies and be done with it all. Ignore the possibility that the town was in further danger, that someone here was planning a day of reckoning. Wham, bam, thank you ma'am – some quick arrests and the six days I had to wait to go home would become zero.

I realised I was shuffling idly through the objects in Theo Campbell's desk drawer. Pens and little notepads. I shoved the desk drawer closed and a plastic ruler wedged itself in the gap. I tried to yank the drawer back open but it stuck, the plastic biting into the wood. I threw my weight backwards and the drawer shunted open, rattling the desk, causing a flush wooden panel at the front to flop open.

Kash and I looked into the cavity the panel had revealed.

My hopes of leaving dissolved.

Chapter 39

I KNELT AND peered into the dark slot in the side of the desk, ten centimetres wide, crammed with black plastic. I pulled out a package. It was as big as a shoebox, wrapped tightly in duct tape to form a lumpy rectangle.

‘Christ, she was right,’ I breathed. I took a pair of scissors from the desktop and began to carefully slit open the side of the package. ‘What do you think it is? It’s heavy. Might be black tar.’

Kash knelt beside me. I could smell the sweat on him. That morning, I’d woken to the sound of him huffing back and forth across Snale’s lawn, stopping, dropping and pumping out push-ups to timed beeps from his phone. Snale had been standing at the windows to the porch, enjoying a coffee, watching the show. Kash’s bare chest glistening with sweat in the new pink light of sunrise.

I slipped a small bag out of the package. A heavy, dusty brown rock about half the size of a golf ball. I opened the bag and took out the rock.

‘Brown rock heroin,’ Kash said. ‘I’ve seen it over there in northern Africa. Dirty stuff from back-shed kitchens. Goes cheaper than black tar.’

‘Guess again,’ I said. I spat on the rock in my palm. ‘This rock’s only brown on the outside.’

I rubbed the top layer of dirt from the nugget. The gold shimmered, dull yellow and porous in the light.

‘Whoa!’ Kash snatched the gold from me. I rolled my eyes and took another rock from the package. ‘That is one massive piece of cheese!’

‘That’s about two ounces you’re holding,’ I said. I crossed my legs and took out my phone, looked up a converter on Google. ‘About a thousand bucks on the market right now.’

We looked at the bag between us. I weighed it in my hands. I guessed I was holding about two kilos, or seventy ounces. Approximately eighty thousand dollars’ worth of precious metal.

‘What. The. Hell.’ Kash looked at me. ‘You think it’s legit?’

‘I have no idea,’ I said. ‘You can’t buy it like this. This is right out of the ground. So, what? Campbell’s taken it out of the ground, or someone he knows has? This is not his retirement nest egg. I’m betting it’s not even declared as a personal asset for tax purposes, if he’s got it squirrelled away like this.’

‘How does he have so much of it?’ Kash asked. ‘You couldn’t find

this much all in one go. It must represent years, decades, of fossicking with a metal detector.'

'Maybe he did find it all in one place,' I murmured, losing myself in thought. 'Maybe that's why it's hidden.'

'We've got to put this back.' Kash took the nugget from my hand and tucked it back into the package. 'There's nothing to prove it doesn't legitimately belong to Theo Campbell. He might have hidden it in case of a break-in.'

'If Theo found it legally, Olivia would know about it, right?' I stood, holding the package against my chest. I pulled a strip of tape from the dispenser Theo kept beside his monitor and sealed the package shut. 'Olivia, can we borrow you for a minute?'

Theo Campbell's wife heard my call from the living room and came in. She'd been crying again, probably urged on by Snale's kind, accepting face, her warm hands.

I stood holding the package under my arm in full view. I even stepped aside so that Olivia could see that the secret panel in Theo's desk was hanging open.

'We were just wondering if Theo had a ... a diary?' I asked casually. 'A calendar or something? We just wanted to check out his forecasted appointments.'

Olivia ignored the package in my arms, the door of the desk. She went, bleary eyed, to the laptop screen.

'He used the desktop calendar,' she sniffed, waking the little machine with a tap of her finger. She opened the calendar and pointed. 'Here.'

I put the package on the desk, right beside her hand. She glanced at it, uninterested.

'What's that?' she asked.

'Oh, forensic stuff. Tools. They keep them packed up in little baggies. Keep them sterile.'

'This bloody desk.' Olivia bent and popped the little panel at the front of the desk shut. 'It's a million years old. Theo's father's.'

She sighed and made for the door.

'Well, that answers that question,' I told Kash, hefting the gold off the desk again. 'She had no interest in it. She's never seen it before. I'm convinced.' I offloaded the package to Kash. 'We're taking this with us. I'm going to make a bet Theo Campbell wasn't the only person who knows about it.'

Chapter 40

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR NIGEL Spader was the God of Gotham. It was one of his only hobbies, constructing his dark city, a place where good and evil clashed violently over hand-painted sidewalks and green flocked grass. The sprawling table in the centre of the concrete garage barely contained the complex miniature model city. Artistically warped and leaning buildings crowded over a long, narrow headland jutting into a model harbour filled with black waves. The miniature city had everything. Uptown, the narrow streets held neat brownstone townhouses and apartment buildings lined with tiny fire-escapes. Downtown, he had constructed the imposing city hall with hundreds of steps, homeless people glued in and around its buttressed sides with their trolleys of garbage. Men in suits with long black coats froze mid-stride on the sidewalk, briefcases swinging, passing the tiny models of prostitutes on the corners.

Nigel sat on a leather stool by the sprawling Wayne Manor, gluing the side of the ancient building to the front with the careful strokes of a nail polish brush. The battery-operated subway train emerged from the tunnel at the side of the harbour and wound around the corner by his elbow, then over an ornate gothic bridge that had taken Nigel four weeks to create. He felt happy. The world beyond the reach of his garage light, the wet Sydney streets, was nothing. He was the lord of this place, and at this moment, in his universe, everything was well.

The sensation did not last long. Nigel jolted as the garage door slid up just enough to allow Tox Barnes to emerge into the light. The man walked into the garage like he owned it. Nigel found his mouth was hanging open.

‘Evening, Detective.’

Nigel felt a splinter of pain in his brain. He knew Tox Barnes. Everybody did. The man was rumoured to have murdered a mother and young son when he was a child himself, an eruption of violence from a group of boys who must have been frenzied with rage. Nigel didn’t know how much truth there was behind the rumour. All he knew was that Tox Barnes was poison, and that anyone who worked with the man was stained.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’

‘Oh, you know, I was in the neighbourhood. I’m working on the Samuel Blue case. Understand you were head of the task force.’ Tox’s eyes wandered over the enormous model city. He bent and looked

through the windows of an office building, noting the tiny people at the desks on the fourth floor. 'Jesus Christ, this is some set-up you've got here. You've spent a lot of time on this. I thought you were married? You should marry someone.'

'I'm not going to discuss a single aspect of the GRK case with you.' Nigel looked at his hands. He was holding the glued pieces of Wayne Manor together. He could not put them down now, before the glue set, or it would be hours sanding the lumpy glue back off again. 'Get out of my garage.'

'Look, I'm really only interested in Sam Blue's confession,' Tox said. 'I know you've muscled suspects into confessions before. Did you lean on Blue?'

'I'm not ...' Nigel was almost blind with rage. 'Get ... out ... of my ...'

'Huh! Look at this!' Tox said. He reached into the city, somewhere around Third Avenue, and plucked up a prostitute. Nigel heard the snap sound of the glue securing the model woman's feet to the sidewalk. 'You've got tiny little prozzies!'

'Stop! Don't touch that!'

'Oh shit,' Tox examined the figurine's stiletto heels. 'Was that attached? Sorry.'

Nigel put down Wayne Manor, wincing as the still-wet sides became unwed and flopped apart. He shoved Tox in the chest and rescued the miniature prostitute, looking at the space where she'd been ripped from the model.

'Did you lean on Sam Blue, Nigel?' Tox asked.

'We lean on everyone, asshole,' Nigel snapped. 'This is a fucking serial killer case.'

'Well, there's leaning and then there's leaning. Did you guide him into the confession? Did you drop hints about what happened to the missing girls so his story would line up?'

'We did nothing unprofessional.'

'Come on.'

Nigel gave an exasperated growl. 'I wasn't there for the entire interrogation, OK? We took shifts. It's possible someone else dropped hints.'

Tox put a finger on the train tracks. The train stopped at his finger, the tiny wheels grinding in their slots.

'Stop! You're going to break it. This is not a toy, you fuck! This is very expensive shit!'

'Did you reveal anything ...' Tox said slowly, 'that would have led Sam ...'

'I left the autopsy photos with him, OK?' Nigel breathed. 'He'd have known the girls suffered certain injuries from the pictures.'

‘So you forced the confession?’

‘We *encouraged* it. There’s nothing wrong with that. We provided him with materials to help him along. That’s all.’

‘Did you starve him?’

‘No.’

‘Did you beat him?’

‘No!’

‘Did you leave him in the custody of people who *did* do those things?’

‘Get out!’ Nigel grabbed a cricket bat from beside the garage door. ‘Get out of my garage!’

Tox took the train from the tracks, detaching the battery-pack carriage, making the internal lights flicker and die. He threw the train over his shoulder so that it crashed onto the cluttered table against the wall.

‘I wasn’t there for the whole Blue confession, alright?’ Nigel begged. ‘No one was. We didn’t keep a log. It was twenty-two hours. People came and went. The tape wasn’t always on. It’s possible Blue was leaned on too hard.’

‘It’s possible?’

‘It’s possible, yes.’

Tox nodded, wandered around to the harbour, making sure he was always on the opposite side of the table to Nigel. He spied the miniature model of the Joker standing on steps of the town hall, a Tommy gun in his hands. Tox snapped the Joker from his place on the model landscape, smiled at the tiny purple-jacketed figure in his fingers.

‘Ah.’ He smiled. ‘My favourite.’

Tox threw the Joker up and caught him in his palm, put the little man in the pocket of his leather jacket. He winked at Nigel as he ducked back under the garage door and out into the night.

Chapter 41

LINNY SIMPSON CUT a dejected figure at the back of the cafe, staring into a stained coffee cup as Whitt entered. He went to her table and stood there expectantly, perhaps a couple of seconds too long, before she broke from her reverie.

‘Ms Simpson?’

‘Hi,’ she said, watching him sit. The inch of coffee at the bottom of her cup that had so fascinated her looked cold. ‘I don’t have long to talk to you.’

‘That’s perfectly fine. I’m grateful for you giving me any time at all.’ Whitt caught the eye of the waitress and ordered for them both. ‘I understand you’ve stopped cooperating with the officers you’ve been dealing with. Detective Spader and his team.’

‘They don’t believe me,’ Linny said. Though it had been almost five months, Whitt could hear astonishment lingering in Linny’s voice. Flickers of rage. ‘No one believes me. My own family are starting to think twice about my story. I’m getting messages online from people I don’t know saying I’m lying about all this.’

‘Are the messages threatening?’ Whitt asked.

‘They’re abusive,’ Linny said. ‘People think I’m making up what happened because I want to free Sam Blue. Or because I want attention. My fifteen minutes of fame.’

‘There are some difficulties with what you’ve said,’ Whitt said carefully. ‘Your story changed in subtle ways.’

‘Well, it was hard to remember,’ Linny pleaded. ‘I mean, in the beginning. I remember it clearly now.’

Whitt nodded though his thoughts were grave. That wasn’t how memory worked. The longer Linny waited after the actual event, the more degraded her memory of it would become. An inference here, a suggestion there, a few sleepless nights running the thing over in her mind, and the whole story would become unrecognisable.

‘Why don’t you take me back to that day?’ Whitt took out his notebook, slid a collection of papers across the page. ‘I have your police statement here. You say you’d just finished an ethics class ...’

‘I walked over to the parking garage,’ Linny said. ‘Up the fire stairs. There was no one around, not on that level anyway. I think I’d seen some people before I went up, but I’m not sure. He was waiting just next to the door. When I came through, he grabbed me around my throat.’

Whitt made notes. Linny Simpson was the Georges River Killer's type. Brunette. White. Slim, petite. Student of the university, a motivated, budding business undergrad. The way she described being grabbed was convincing. An inexperienced abductor might grab a woman around the middle, allowing her to scream, to throw her weight forwards, her centre of gravity keeping her upright. If he swept his arm around her throat instead, made a headlock, and yanked her backwards, he'd have her off balance and silent.

'He tried to drag me towards a white van parked to the right of the door,' she said. 'I was screaming.'

'How could you have screamed when he had you in a headlock?'

'I don't remember,' she said. 'I was so shocked. It happened so fast.'

'Was the van indeed white?' Whitt asked.

'Yes.'

'Your initial police statement says it was green.'

'I was mistaken,' Linny said. 'I remembered later that it was white.'

There had been no green vans in the car park lot that day. There had been a white one, but it had come and gone well outside the times necessary to line up with Linny's story.

Whitt made a noise in his throat. It sounded more dismissive than he planned. He jumped when Linny banged the table with her palm.

'Hey,' she snapped. 'I thought I was going to die, you understand?' Whitt looked at her eyes, searing with furious tears. 'When was the last time you thought you were going to die?'

Chapter 42

'I DID SCREAM,' Linny insisted. 'I screamed my lungs out.'

Whitt glanced at the police statements lying on the page beside him. Beneath Linny's statement was one from the security guard on the boom gate on the ground floor of the car park lot that day. He had not heard Linny's screams, despite the car park making the perfect echo chamber, the building hollow down the middle through the ramps and the sides open to the buildings around it.

'You say you fought him beside the van,' Whitt said. 'And you got free somehow.'

'I don't know how.'

'Maybe you kicked him? Maybe you punched him?'

'I said, I don't know.' Linny took her coffee from the waitress, hugged it with her hands as she had the other cup. 'I was scared.'

'Did he actually get you into the van?' Whitt asked. 'Did you get in and then somehow get out?'

'The van door was closed,' Linny said.

Whitt wrote furiously. His mind was churning, pumping like an engine. He dipped his shirt cuff in the coffee as he reached for the sugar, cursed himself.

'OK. You struggle, you get free, and you run, and it's then that you notice a girl watching what's happening.'

'A black girl,' Linny said. 'Caitlyn McBeal.'

'Now, I mean, we've got to be careful here,' Whitt warned. 'You say it was Caitlyn McBeal. How do you know that?'

'I've seen pictures of her. She's missing.'

'But you didn't know her personally before you saw her there that day. You didn't say to yourself as you ran past her, "Oh, that's Caitlyn."'

'It was fucking Caitlyn!' Linny yelled. People at the tables near them stopped their conversations, stared. 'This is bullshit! Yes, I was confused in the beginning. I'd hit my head. I got knocked out.'

'Yes,' Whitt said. 'Initially you said there were two girls watching. Caitlyn and another girl. A blonde.'

'No, the blonde wasn't there,' Linny said. 'I made up the blonde.'

Whitt felt a muscle in his jaw twitch. When she was seventeen, the woman sitting before him at the cafe table had made a statement to police that her ex-boyfriend was stalking and harassing her. A couple of weeks later, she withdrew the complaint, her relationship with the

boy obviously repaired. In her secondary statement, Linny had said that she'd 'made up' the stalking allegation.

Linny seemed to know what he was thinking.

'I mean that my brain made it up,' she said. 'Not that I made it up ... deliberately. Consciously.'

'You fled the scene and ran back down the fire-escape stairs,' Whitt said. 'At the bottom you slipped, and you sustained a head injury. You believe you lost consciousness temporarily.'

'Yes.'

'For how long?'

'I don't know,' Linny said. 'It couldn't have been long, right? Someone would have found me.'

'However long it was, no one found you. You regained consciousness on your own and went to the university's administration office to report what had happened,' Whitt said. 'And in that initial report you didn't mention that you'd seen Caitlyn or the blonde girl. You only mentioned her when police arrived, twenty minutes later.'

Linny didn't answer.

'In fact, I have a statement here from one of the administration ladies, Michelle Stanthorp, who says that she and another assistant sat you down behind the counter and while they were hearing your story, she received a call transferred over from the security department. It was from Caitlyn McBeal's mother telling them she was trying to get in contact with the girl. She was concerned for her daughter's safety, worried because Caitlyn had hung up on her unexpectedly and now wasn't answering her phone,' Whitt said. 'Michelle Stanthorp says that while she was on the phone to Mrs McBeal, she drew up Caitlyn's student file, including her photograph, on a computer in full view of where you were sitting.'

When Linny didn't answer, Whitt looked up. The girl's head was bowed into her hands. In all his determination to find the truth, Whitt realised he had slipped into interrogation mode. This girl was not a criminal. At worst, she was a liar. He reached over and took a hand down from her face, squeezed it.

'You don't believe me, do you?' she said.

'I believe something happened to you,' Whitt said gently. 'Something bad. And you didn't deserve me to be so cold about finding out what it was. I'm sorry.'

'It was supposed to have been me,' Linny said. She was suddenly distant, staring out the cafe's front windows to the busy street. Her teary eyes wandered back to Whitt. 'Whatever happened to her, whether she's dead or alive, it was supposed to have been me.'

Whitt closed his notebook. Sighed.

'You've got to find him,' Linny said. 'Before he does it again.'

Chapter 43

THE DAY WAS filled with interviews. Zac Taby had said that there were four other Last Chance Valley kids who sat in on the explosives lesson with the visiting student teacher two years earlier. Of those four, one, Brandon Skinner, had died of a drug overdose the year before, home alone and experimenting with meth. The remaining three were called to Snale's place, two of them with parents in tow. Snale and I sat them down on the couch and picked their brains. Had they participated in the spate of firecracker mischief that had ensued after the ill-fated lesson? Did they know anyone who had? How did they feel about the town and its people? How did their friends feel? Did they know anyone who owned a bright red backpack? The answers to our questions, from all of the kids, were a consistent no. These were the bored, hopeless rug rats of Last Chance. They got up to trouble. It was what kids did out here. None of them were going to admit anything.

Townpeople came to the door to drop helpful hints to Snale and me about locals they thought were responsible for the bombing. Most of the tips were about Zac Taby. There were a couple of mentions of a man named Jed Chatt who lived outside town, Zac's 'scary old man'.

Whitt started texting me at midday on a new number. I didn't ask why.

The account you set up for Sam is empty. I visited. He's nervous.

I eased air through my teeth. I'd known, as soon as my brother was arrested, that this was going to be an expensive time in both our lives. With his permission, I'd sold almost all of Sam's possessions immediately after his arrest, and taken charge of his bank account. I'd sold my apartment, my car, and some collectibles of my own, and unlocked some term deposits of my personal savings. Within a week of his arrest, the spending started. I put some money into Sam's commissary account at the remand centre so he could buy snacks and sundries, toothpaste and the like. Then, like clockwork, the threats on his life began. I started feeding protection money into his account, as slowly as I could manage, just enough to keep his enemies satisfied. I knew they'd want more in time. But all I had to do was keep Sam alive until the end of his trial. I'd take out a loan if I had to. Get a second and third job. Whatever it took.

I'll deposit some more now, I told Whitt. You and Tox OK?

There was a lengthy pause. *I'm not sure we're the most suited of partners. He's an unsettling person with an unsettling reputation, and I*

worry about his actual plans for the killer if we find him.

I smiled at that. Tox was, indeed, unsettling. Whitt had likely heard by now the rumour on the police force that Tox had murdered a mother and her son when he was a kid. I was one of few people who knew the real truth – but I wouldn't divulge Tox's secret behind his back.

I texted Whitt, tried to stem his curiosity.

Five days and I'll be home. Tox is good people. Trust me. You're safe with him.

He smells like a wet dog, Whitt replied.

Chapter 44

I BORROWED SNALE'S car and took a drive out into the desert to clear my head while she and Kash worked on the package of gold from Olivia Campbell's house. When I had left Snale's place the two were dissecting it, weighing the gold and using lifting tape to secure any prints from the wrapping. Kash was rambling about how the difficulty of tracing precious metals made them perfect funding for terrorism.

I understood Kash's way of looking at the world. I knew officers who had worked in Sex Crimes so long they let it divide their minds clean in half, so that all men became potential predators and all women their potential prey. To stay away from men was to be, by definition, safe.

I'd called Tenacity on the hands-free without asking myself why. I guess I was curious to see if it was indeed the Tenacity whose case I'd solved years earlier.

When she picked up, she sounded like she was clattering around the house, moving pots and pans.

'Oh my God, Harry,' she laughed. 'What a surprise.'

'Just checking in on my tenacious friend,' I said. 'How's things?'

A little guilt rippled through me as she sighed and started complaining about how her mother couldn't find a job, her brother was getting sued, she couldn't keep her house clean. She told me she'd been doing great in counselling, though. I didn't know how to get around to the topic of Kash, or even if I should. I'd decided that it was totally inappropriate of me to even think of talking to her about him.

'I'm in the middle of a divorce, though,' she said.

'Oh dear.'

'I've been with Elliot sixteen years,' she said. 'We were high school sweethearts.'

I made an awkward noise. Tenacity paused.

'What?'

'I think I might be on a case with him.'

'Who? Elliot?' The clattering in the background of the call stopped. 'Elliot Kash? Jesus!' She gave a humourless laugh. 'Small world.'

'I feel very ashamed,' I said. 'I heard him say your name, and I thought –'

'You thought, "How many fucking *Tenacitys* could there possibly be in the world?" I get it all the time. Let me guess, you want me to drag him home and out of your hair.'

My face was burning. I tried to focus on the road.

‘Well, you listen to me, Harriet Blue,’ she said. ‘I don’t care if you have to chain him to the front fence of the town hall. You keep him out there as long as you can. I need a break, you understand?’

‘A break from what?’

‘From feeling like I’m going to get held hostage every time I walk into a bloody airport!’ She was ranting now. ‘From looking at every person on the bus like their bag might be packed with explosives! From waking up every morning to *Voice of the Caliphate* on the radio, copies of jihadi recruitment magazines spread all over the kitchen table! My friends think he’s a fucking nutcase. Elliot’s obsession with Islamic terrorism is driving me nuts. I thought *I* had problems.’

‘Well, it’s his job,’ I reasoned. ‘I mean –’

‘It’s not his job,’ she snapped. ‘It’s his *life*. When I met Ell he was a laid-back surfer type. He was a bricklayer. Hard hands. Brown as a nut. Then everything changed. He went to Bali on a surfing trip with four of his mates and they all went to the Sari Club on the first night.’

My heart sank. I knew where this was going. In 2002, two hundred and two people, including eighty-eight Australians, had been killed by a suicide bombing in Kuta conducted by an Islamic terrorist group called Jemaah Islamiyah. One of the bombs had gone off outside the Sari Club, which was full of tourists having a good time.

‘Three of his friends died that night,’ she said. ‘The fourth died in hospital the next day. Elliot applied for a fast-track uni degree two weeks later. International relations, security major. Before I knew it he was interviewing for position with ASIO. And ever since then it’s been *this*.’ I imagined her standing in her kitchen gesturing angrily around the countertops laden with stacks of books and papers, aerial shots of tiny Afghan villages. ‘I can’t keep doing this. Elliot is not going to stop terrorism all by himself. He’s going to end up as their next victim, by destroying everything and everyone he loves with his fixation.’

Chapter 45

I'D TURNED OFF the highway onto the faint tyre tracks in the hard earth that led towards the scary old man's house. The land was sparsely populated here with spiky desert plants. Inhospitable brush led to distant clumps of trees dotting the horizon like approaching armies, shimmering in the heat. Last Chance Valley seemed like an oasis compared with this endless dead zone of shadowed valleys and hazardous cliffs. There were no landmarks to guide the wanderer. Mobs of grey kangaroos lounged in the minimal shade, eyeing the car as I passed.

Snale had briefed me on Jed Chatt while she stood over the dining room table, marking out the tiny speck that was his house on his vast property in the empty space west of Last Chance. There had been a dispute between Jed's people and Dez's nearly two hundred years earlier, apparently over land within the valley that both parties seemed to want. Snale didn't know much more about it than that, but she told me that the resentment ran deep. Jed hardly came into the town at all, but when he did people shied away from him. He would be dependent on Dez for his mail services, and on the town for his food and supplies, the occasional visits of fly-in, fly-out doctors and dentists. Jed seemed like a hovering black eagle, the townspeople in the valley uneasy mice.

The house sat perched on the side of a low hill facing back towards the valley, only the gentle slope of Last Chance Valley's crumbly ridge visible in the distance. I got out at the bottom of the hill and looked up towards the property, saw no one. The place was very bare, functional. Shutters closed against the raging sun. A porch that hadn't been painted in years. There was a small awning where a person might host barbecues, but there were no chairs suggesting anyone ever did. Instead the thing stood rusted, propped up on sandstone blocks. There was a collection of rusty gas bottles under one table.

I walked up onto the porch. Jed was sitting so still that I must have stood in his presence for a good twenty seconds before I noticed him. The man lounged in an old mustard-coloured armchair in the shade of a floral sheet nailed to the rafters, a makeshift screen trying and failing to block the sun. I was wandering along when I noticed him, the gun in his hand trained on me.

Chapter 46

‘THAT’S FAR ENOUGH,’ the man said.

I’d expected someone older, more decrepit looking. But Jed Chatt wouldn’t have been sixty, or if he was, he carried it well. Even from the way he sat, I could see he was a tall, slender man with broad shoulders and strong arms. Black curly hair streaked with grey, dark brown skin. The sawn-off shotgun sitting along his leg was a well-oiled thing with a duct-taped handle.

I put my hands out slightly from my sides, froze with one foot out, the heel up, mid-step.

‘I’m a cop,’ I said.

‘I thought so.’ He nodded to a huge rifle sitting on a table to his left, pointed at my car. There was a long scope mounted on it. ‘I had you in my sights not long after you turned off the highway. Saw you talking while you drove.’

I glanced towards the road.

‘I figured you were either a crazy person talking to yourself, or a sane person talking on a phone. The only person out here so stressed they’ve got to talk and drive at the same time would be a cop.’

‘Good guess,’ I said. ‘Now put the gun down.’

‘You put yours down first.’

I reached slowly behind me and took my pistol from the back of my jeans, set it on the ground at my feet. Jed responded by shifting the aim of his gun from my belly to my knee.

‘I assume you’re Jed Chatt, terror of Last Chance Valley.’

‘You’ve got the right guy.’

‘I’m Harriet Blue,’ I said. I felt a small measure of relief when he didn’t show any recognition of the name. ‘I just want to talk.’

‘Is this about the boy?’ he asked.

‘What boy?’ I said. He didn’t answer. We stared at each other, neither daring to be the one to show their cards first. It was only when a thin, peeling cry sounded from inside the little house that the expression on his face changed, softened for an instant, before hardening again.

I cocked my head. ‘Is that ... Is that a *baby*?’

Jed put the shotgun down and emerged from his chair, even taller than I had imagined. He walked past me and disappeared into the house. I followed him and stood in the doorway. It was dark and cool

inside. Pushed up against the back of the couch was a battered wooden baby's crib. There was almost no other furniture in the room. The big man took an infant from the stark cotton sheet and lifted it against his chest.

I was shaken and confused by Jed's transformation from menacing armchair spider to whatever he was now, holding the child. I stepped closer. The baby was brown-skinned as he was, gripping at the tired blue cotton of his old singlet.

'Nobody invited you in,' he said.

'Is this the boy you were talking about?' I asked. Jed glanced sideways at me, said nothing. I watched as he tried to hold the baby and retrieve the child's teething ring from the crib at the same time. I bent down and got it for him. Our fingers brushed. Jed's skin was hard and warm.

'No one in the town told me you had a kid out here.'

'I'd be surprised if anyone knew,' he said. 'It's none of their business.'

'Whose ...' I struggled. 'I mean, you're a bit ... mature ... to have a newborn.'

'It's a long story,' he said. 'If you're not here about the child, then it's none of your business, either.'

The baby played with the teething ring. I sat on the arm of the sofa and watched the man taking a bottle of formula from the fridge, boiling the kettle, pouring the water into a bowl. He rested the milk bottle in the bowl, turned it slowly, the baby grizzling against his chest. The hand that held the baby's bottom tapped it gently, a soft, steady beat. This man had raised children before. But as I looked around the walls, there were no pictures of them. The baby's arrival seemed to have been an unplanned thing. There was a small bag of children's clothes by the door and not a toy in sight. The infant and the man were alone out here. There was no sign of a woman's touch about the place. I spied a handgun on the counter beside some old books full of handwritten notes.

'What are you here for?' Jed asked.

'I'm part of the investigation into Theo Campbell's death.'

'His what?' Jed was testing the temperature of the milk on his hairy forearm. 'Theo Campbell's not dead.'

'I've got a Forensics team who begs to differ.'

'What happened?'

I noted the question. *What happened?* rather than *Who killed him?*, a question that might have suggested he knew Theo Campbell had been murdered. The tension in my chest was starting to ease.

'That's what I'd like to know.'

'I can't help you,' he said. 'I stay out of the town as much as I can.'

‘People down there don’t seem to like you.’

He snorted a small laugh. Bitter, and tired. ‘I don’t fit into the narrative.’

I was beginning to think he didn’t fit into my narrative either, that I was wasting my time out here. It didn’t make sense that this man would have been setting up bombings, planning to terrorise a town full of people with a baby strapped into the passenger seat of his dusty old ute. I found myself hazarding a few steps closer to the man and the child, a strange desire stirring in me to see the baby’s eyes.

I was knocked out of my spell by the sound of barking coming from outside the house. Jed and I turned towards the sound, and I saw Digger the dog crossing in front of my car, sniffing at the wheels.

‘That bloody dog,’ I said. ‘It sure gets around.’

‘You can take it back to town before I shoot it,’ Jed said, slipping out from between me and the kitchen counter, taking the baby out of sight. ‘I’ll give you a thirty-second head start.’

Chapter 47

SNALE WAS WAITING for me outside John Destro's beautiful, sprawling mansion just down from the schoolhouse on the northern side of Last Chance Valley. Dez had organised the dinner with Snale – the officer agreed he had the best relationships with everyone in Last Chance, would know things about them that she didn't. Dez seemed somehow to have secured all the best grass in the small town. To the right of the double garage I could see an extensive green lawn softening to sparse fields inhabited by slow-moving cows. The animals made long shadows as the sun lingered on the edge of the valley rim.

'Where did you go?'

'I went out to see Jed Chatt,' I said.

'What!' Snale slapped my arm. 'By yourself? Are you crazy?'

'I don't think he's as scary as you all make out.'

'He's plenty scary,' she said. 'It's not right, him living out there all by himself with nothing to do. Creeping into the town to buy his supplies, not talking to anybody. It's weird. I wish he'd just go off somewhere else. He gives me the willies.'

I don't fit into the narrative. Jed's words came back to me. *I don't fit in.*

'Is he the only member of the Chatt family living nearby?' I asked.

Snale nodded. 'All his people moved on years ago,' she said, walking me to the front doors of Dez's house. 'They were all scattered around, and it was tense, you know, because of the fight between the two families way back when. Some were in the town, but they didn't seem to belong. They all went their separate ways eventually, but he stayed. Making us all feel bad for the way we live down here in the valley.'

'Do you know much about his family?' I asked. 'The ones who moved on?'

'No.' Snale shrugged. 'I don't think they keep in touch.'

I didn't want to mention the baby. Jed had been right to suspect that, as a non-local cop, I'd probably come out to check on the welfare of the child in his care, concerned about the inappropriateness of the environment for raising a baby. I knew plenty about child custody from my time as a foster kid. There was no way the authorities would condone the arrangement out there, Jed and the baby alone in the desert, the guns and the blistering isolation.

I thought about my mother. When child services had come and taken my brother and me away from her, we'd been covered in

cigarette burns and rashes, malnourished, and bruised. The one-bedroom apartment where we lived with her, her pimp and another man had been raided on suspicion of drug dealing the week before by police, the door splintered and duct-taped back together from being kicked in. A cop in the raiding party had probably reported my brother's and my condition to child services.

I wasn't going to be the cop who brought child services down on Jed Chatt. But I knew I wanted to go back, to understand what was happening out there. To discover if the man was a danger to himself, the baby, or the town.

Chapter 48

WE ENTERED THE high-ceilinged hall of the house. There were pictures lining the walls, framed landscapes of the sun hitting Last Chance Valley at different romantic angles, some vintage blueprints of the town pub and the post office. I stopped by a charcoal sketch of a bunch of European settlers standing by the edge of the empty valley, shovels and pickaxes on their backs, their bonneted wives hugging children nearby.

‘This was done by my great uncle,’ Dez said, coming up beside me. He smelled of aftershave and was dressed crisply in a stark white shirt and tie. ‘Beautiful artwork, right? The family camped up there on the ridge for two months while the men went down and prepared the valley.’

‘Hmm,’ I said. ‘It’s nice.’

‘There are more here.’ He led me into the living room. ‘Make yourself at home. Can I get you a glass of wine?’

Kash was standing on the porch looking at the cows in the field, a small glass of what might have been Scotch in his hand. I could only see a slice of his profile, but he looked sad. I wondered if he’d spoken to Tenacity while I’d been out with Jed. He noticed me through the window, glanced a little guiltily at his Scotch. I smiled.

The girl who wandered out from the kitchen came as a surprise. A waif-like figure with long blonde hair. Dez’s daughter. She’d managed to escape her father’s squat, bulky frame but she had his ginger freckles snaking down her cream-coloured arms. She came over and stood beside me, admiring the sketch.

‘This is from the north side,’ she said, pointing. ‘They walked around the whole valley trying to find the best way in before they descended. It was treacherous. They lost a couple of horses just trying to get down.’

‘Harriet, allow me to introduce my daughter, Bella. She’s been hearing stories of the Destro settlement since she was a kid.’ Dez was setting the table. I took a chair on the end, next to Snale.

‘Do you live here with your dad?’ I asked. Bella smirked. She was wearing a T-shirt that read ‘I’d wear it if it came in black’ and shorts, a pair of expensive slippers. She went to a nearby chair and sat down.

‘Hardly. I’m just visiting. I’m supposed to be studying for end-of-year exams. I’m at Sydney Uni, law and politics.’

I almost choked on my drink.

‘Yeah.’ Bella gave me a forgiving smile, curled her feet up into her chair like a cat. ‘I know who you are. I’ve been following your brother’s case since the girls started disappearing. Most of my courses were online at the time, so I wasn’t around, but people were pretty scared. I watched it all on the TV. And then Dad told me you were out here. I mean, wow. Did you have any idea your brother was killing chicks?’

‘Bella!’ Dez snapped. ‘Detective Blue doesn’t want to discuss her brother’s situation. This is supposed to be a friendly dinner.’

The girl shrugged.

Dez put out snacks and we made small talk about the town and its various characters. Kash was quiet, staring into his drink. In time Dez cleared the plates and we sat down at the dining table. I could feel Bella’s eyes wandering over me while I talked to Snale.

‘Do you know much about her brother’s case?’ Bella asked Snale, leaning around me.

‘Bell, really,’ Snale sighed.

‘Hey, everybody’s got skeletons in their closet,’ the girl said, playing with her fork. ‘I don’t think you’ve got anything to be ashamed of, Harry. Our people slaughtered the Indigenous inhabitants of Last Chance Valley when they settled here. They banished the survivors to the desert. Two centuries later there’s only one of them left, loitering out there in the badlands like a stain no one can get out.’

Dez sighed at the ceiling. ‘Do we have to talk about this?’ Bella was watching me carefully, waiting for a reaction. ‘People think they called it Last Chance because of all the desert,’ she said. ‘Your last chance for food and shelter before the big barren nothingness in all directions. But it’s not true. The Destro family turned up, and told the natives to get out. And when they wouldn’t, they gave them one last chance before they came down the mountainside with their guns.’

‘Bella!’ Dez thumped the tabletop. ‘Go into the kitchen and check on the roast.’

The girl sauntered away, leaving tension and embarrassment in her wake.

Chapter 49

‘THIS IS WHAT you get when you send your children to university.’ Dez ran a hand over his receding hairline, made a stiff tuft of the dark orange hair that remained. ‘They come back *critical thinkers*. Ready to question everything.’

‘Is she right?’ I asked as Bella brought out some small plates of an entree. ‘Did your ancestors kill off the Indigenous population of the valley?’

‘The history is not as concrete as Bella would have you believe,’ Dez said. ‘The Destro people kept diaries and logs, and there are things we can infer from their letters back and forth to England. But it was mainly the womenfolk doing the writing, and they didn’t note that sort of thing down. Certainly there were fatalities. But we don’t know if that’s because there were accidents when the Indigenous people tried to help the Destro family settle or what. Jed’s ancestors were nomadic, as I understand it, so I don’t see why our people wouldn’t have just moved them on if a disagreement occurred.’

‘Last Chance Valley is an anomaly out here,’ Bella said. ‘As you’ve likely noticed. The soil is different. It holds water. It’s sheltered. The high rock walls make hunting easier. This is the best place for a settlement for hundreds of kilometres around. I wouldn’t give it up without a fight, if it were me.’

‘Well, it’s not you, darling.’ Dez smiled stiffly and patted his daughter’s hand. He continued. ‘Whether some were killed or not, the majority of the Indigenous residents resettled outside the valley and then moved on. Now, only Jed remains. I’ve tried to bring him back into the fold but he’s not interested. He’s a stubborn man.’

‘You tried to enlist him as a tourist attraction,’ Bella retorted.

‘A what?’ Snale asked.

‘I tried to get his help on the leadership program,’ Dez said. ‘Bella is convinced I was being racist.’

‘You were.’

‘I run a program every year with kids from the surrounding towns,’ Dez explained to me. ‘Anyone can apply for it, and I liaise with the teachers to find out who the best candidates are. Who has the most potential. I take three or four kids out into the desert, and we do exercises. I thought maybe Jed could help me out, with some of his cultural knowledge. As part of the government reconciliation program, Jed’s people were given native title for a lot of land out there beyond

the town limits. I don't know that he makes much use of it. There's nothing out there. But he legally owns it, and he could exclude us from it if he ever desired. I thought maybe he could take us around, you know? He'd know things. Desert sustenance, for example. The importance of certain landmarks and animals to the Aboriginal people of this area.'

'Racist.'

'Bella!'

'What? It's racist,' she insisted. 'You're making a whole host of degrading cultural assumptions. You assume this guy must be some sort of mystical Aboriginal tracker just because he's got Indigenous heritage.' She wagged her fingers like she was doing a magic trick. 'He'll talk to you about the rainbow serpent and how the kangaroo got its tail and he'll just forget about all the *rape of his native land* stuff. All that unpleasantness is in the past, right?'

Dez covered his eyes.

'Even if this guy did have loads of really interesting cultural knowledge, why would you assume he'd want to share that knowledge with you?'

'Why wouldn't he?' Dez shrugged.

'You're right.' Bella sipped her wine. 'Of *course* he would. He'd be so *pleased* to be of assistance, to be *invited* to be a part of the town.'

'What do you suggest I do with him then?'

'Don't *do* anything with him,' Bella said. 'He clearly wants to be left alone. Leave him alone. The guy doesn't want to connect with the people of this town because he doesn't like them. You can't make people like you.'

'How could you not like us?' Snale said. 'We're lovely.'

'Someone's trying to kill you all, Vicky,' Bella said. 'You can't be that nice.'

Chapter 50

DEZ STARED AT the ceiling. He seemed to be looking for an escape hatch from his daughter's accusations.

'Let me show you one of our albums,' he said. He went to a nearby cabinet and fished out a photo album. I put the book between Snale and me and started flipping through the pictures. Gangly teenagers, all lanky with knobbly knees and big smiles, crouched on rocks before the sheer edge of Last Chance Valley. Some were climbing a huge rock formation in the desert. Some stood pointing towards the horizon. Bright faces, sunburned girls and boys sitting in the light of a fire.

'What sort of leadership stuff do you do with the kids out there?' I asked.

'Navigation, emergency survival techniques, a bit of endurance and adventure training.'

Kash had perked up beside me.

'That sounds awesome!' he said. 'How'd you develop the program?'

'Oh, I'm an old reservist, myself.'

'That's great.' Kash downed his Scotch quickly. 'I'd love to know what techniques you're using. Do you get them into any self-defence tactics?'

'Well, I would, but I don't have much experience in –'

'Oh, wow.' Kash pulled his chair in, sat upright like an obedient German shepherd. 'I have some great drills for young people. Leadership stuff, like you're looking for. I got my certification as a recruit trainer a while back. I could definitely assist.'

The two fell into conversation. Bella appeared in a couple of the photographs, hanging out at the edge of the frame, fiddling with her bag or staring at the fire. She was watching me from across the table, one leg drawn up so that her elbow rested on her knee, pushing food restlessly around her plate.

'Did you go on many of the expeditions?' I asked.

'A few,' she said. 'It was usually me behind the camera.'

Snale looked at an image of Dez leading a bunch of kids through a search-and-rescue drill, four of them carrying another on a stretcher. Bella seemed the only person not interested in the photos.

'So who killed Theo Campbell?' Bella asked idly, with a mouth full of beans. I had to draw myself away from the adventures before me.

'You tell me,' I said.

'I think he was into some tricky stuff.' She smiled. 'He was starting

to get a bit loose with the rules by the time I was ready to leave here for uni last year. Around that time he caught a bunch of us on the south ridge hanging out, smokin' weed.'

I looked to Bella's father to see if he'd react to his daughter's admission. But he was busy talking to Kash.

'Chief Campbell didn't do anything,' Bella continued. 'Didn't even take it off us. Just stopped and chatted for a while. I half expected him to ask for a toke. Guess he was getting old. Didn't care anymore.'

'And who exactly were you up there smoking weed with, young lady?' Snale asked.

'You know me, Vicky.' Bella tapped the side of her nose. 'I'm good with my secrets.' Something over my shoulder, through the glass doors to the porch, caught her eye. She leaned sideways, took another spoonful of beans into her mouth.

'Better get your guns out, coppers,' she said, seeming amused and nodding towards the doors. 'There's trouble out there.'

Chapter 51

THE SOUND OF footsteps, followed by thumping at the front door. I'd risen from my chair instinctively and dashed down the hall, my gun stupidly still on the coffee table where I'd left it before dinner. Zac Taby was leaning against the door, bashing on it with his hands. He all but fell into my arms as I yanked it open. He was drenched in sweat and shaking.

'They're after me! They're after me!'

'What the hell's going on?'

'Help! They shot at me! They're trying to kill me!'

I went out into the night. It was quiet. On the road in the distance I could see a car stopped, its headlights picking up the evening dust shifting in the gentle breeze, the occasional fluttering of a locust attracted to its beams. I started down the garden path and out of Dez's front gate. Kash was close behind me, actioning his pistol.

'Who is it?'

'Probably Jace Robit and his merry band of meatheads.'

'If they fired a shot at that kid, we'll need to bring them all in.'

'I'll just talk to them,' I said, waving him off. 'Stay here. We don't want to present a hostile front.'

The car remained idle, the engine humming as I approached. I could see there were four men in it. The elbow hanging out the driver's side indeed belonged to the leathery brown body of Jace Robit. He was watching me approach with a small smile playing about his lips. I knew these men. Though they'd used their truck tonight to chase down a frightened teenager, cracking pot shots off over his head to put the fear of God into him, he wasn't their usual quarry. These were the guys who went out chasing, hunting, gutting bush pigs and kangaroos. The bloodthirsty, bored, angry men of small towns who had too much firepower and not enough targets to keep them satisfied.

I gained speed as I approached the car, lifted my boot as I got within range and kicked the mirror off the driver's side door. The mirror and its casing smashed into the road, glass sparkling in the dim light.

'Hey! What the fuck!'

Jace shouldered the door open, jumped down and grabbed my shoulder, fingers going for the underside of my arm in a bruising grip. I gave him a half-strength jab to the face, sending him stumbling back,

more surprised than injured.

‘I told you to leave that kid alone,’ I said. ‘You got hearing problems?’

‘And I told *you* that we handle things ourselves out here,’ Jace said. The other men were out of the truck now and all around me. Two were behind me, blocking Kash’s advance. My partner was on the road, a hundred metres back and approaching fast, his gun by his side.

‘That kid’s a danger to our town.’ Jace pointed at the house. ‘We want him out. I don’t care what you do with him. Take him back to the fucking city with you. Take him into – what d’you call it – protective custody.’

‘He hasn’t done anything wrong.’

One of the farmers behind me snorted.

‘You’re not from around here, sweetheart,’ Jace sneered. ‘You’ve got to understand. There are people who belong here, and people who don’t. And the Taby kid doesn’t belong. In the bush, you have the native animals, and you have introduced species.’ He held one palm up, then another, separate. ‘Like feral cats. They prey on the natives. If you don’t squash ’em before they multiply, suddenly you’ll be overrun.’

‘Thanks for the environmental science class,’ I said. ‘Truly enlightening. I have a couple of lessons of my own, you know. But you’re not going to enjoy them. So I’m telling you just one last time. Get back in that truck and fuck off home, before I decide to start teaching.’ A ripple of surprise went up through the group of men around me. They looked at each other and laughed. None of them backed down.

‘Harry.’ Kash was at the edge of the gathering now. ‘Don’t.’

‘Don’t what?’ Jace sniffed, looked me up and down.

‘You heard the man, Elliot,’ I said, cracking my knuckles. ‘He said they handle things themselves out here. So let’s handle it.’

Chapter 52

WHEN I FIGHT men, they try to put me on the ground first. They don't want to punch a woman right away. Not until they understand that I'm no ordinary woman. They figure they can grab me and push me into the dirt and I'll realise that I've been playing big boy games and I need to go back to my dolls and stop fooling myself. Jace Robit was a hard man. Wiry strength from years working on farms, burning off fat and loading muscle around uncrackable bones. His big hands came for my shoulders again. I ducked and stepped sideways, gave him a fast uppercut to the ribs, knocking the wind out of him. He stumbled, tried to swing an arm around the back of my neck. I bowed out of it, stepped behind him and kicked him in the arse.

A short, involuntary laugh from the men around him, a sudden betrayal. Jace's fury was rising quickly. Big mistake, fighting angry. I was enjoying this. I wanted them all to jump in at once. This was my therapy. I sidestepped Jace as he came for me again but he saw the move, swung and glanced his knuckles off my ear. I took the pain. Lapped it up gratefully. I stepped forwards and faked a left jab, punched him square in the nose with my right.

Blood on the dirt. Exhilaration zapped through me at the sight of it.

'Steady on!' One of the farmers stepped towards us, having had quite enough of my show. He grabbed me from behind and I kicked Jace in the chest, used the backward momentum to shove me into the second attacker, the two of us barrelling into the ground. I rolled, righted, stepped on his hand and heard a crunch. The man screamed.

'Grab her,' one of them said. 'Fucking grab her, John!'

'Yeah, John,' – I beckoned the man with a wave – 'come grab me.'

The two of them lunged at me at once. Hardly fair, but not unexpected. They thought I'd back up, so I dove instead for John's legs and felt him tumble over me, his own momentum working against him. John's friend came for me and I kicked up at him from the ground, catching him in the chin.

Jace's nose was pouring blood down his face as his friends dragged him to his feet. The men gathered together to reassess the situation. Mentions of a 'psycho bitch'.

I wasn't done yet. But when I beckoned the men forwards again, none of them moved. They just stood there, panting, bewildered by the first devastating round.

'Come on,' I urged. My own fury was starting to rise. No one moved.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake! You pussies!’

I watched the men drive off past Dez’s house, standing in the dark beside Kash. My partner had surprisingly little to say at first. We walked back down the dusty road together under the stars. I hadn’t even exerted myself enough to break a sweat. The punch in the ear had caused a warm, throbbing pain that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. I reached up and held it, relished in the hurt. It would bruise. It’d be hard to sleep on it. That was something, at least. Kash laughed after a while and I looked up at him.

‘I thought you said we didn’t want to present a hostile front,’ he said.

‘That wasn’t hostile,’ I said. ‘Hostile would have been arresting them on sight. They wanted us to speak their language. I spoke it. I just wish they’d held out longer.’

He didn’t reply. I knew how it sounded. My brother was accused of being one of the most vicious, violent people in the nation’s history, and here I was, upset that I hadn’t been able to beat a bunch of men into unconsciousness. But the words just came out of me before I could stop them. Kash glanced sideways at me and I caught it – the wary look of someone assessing a threat.

The truth was, Kash was right to be wary of me. Most of my life I’d wavered over a very thin line between light and dark sides of my being. There were things in me that were frightening. How quick I was to anger. How much I liked hurting people sometimes. My mind was full of shadowy places where violent fantasies lived, sickening things that sometimes came out in my dreams. Vengeance I played out mentally against bad people from my past. Most of the time, my light half won out, and the shadows and smoke were sent recoiling to where they belonged, not completely driven out, but controlled.

But sometimes, the halves collided. The score came down fifty fifty, and everyone was left guessing what I might do.

Even me.

Chapter 53

WHITT HAD DECIDED he wasn't comfortable with Tox Barnes at all. A Sydney colleague had warned him that he'd suffer consequences from associating himself with the shaggy, despondent detective. That a deep, hidden sin in Tox's past, a double murder, some said, meant that he was an enemy within the ranks of the police, and that he was to be avoided at all costs.

It wasn't just that, though. To be in the man's presence felt hazardous, like a journey along a frozen road at night with rain battering the windscreen. The man spoke little, laughed almost never, and caused people who didn't even know him to shift out of his path. He was stale-smelling and dusty all the time, as though when he went home at night to wherever in the world that might be, he simply tucked himself into an old cupboard and closed the door. Whitt's own terrible history had caused him to become almost obsessed with freshness and newness, the cleanliness and orderliness of packaged things. He changed his toothbrush on the first of every month. He littered his sock drawer with moisture absorbers. If things weren't exactly right, they were deeply, inexcusably wrong.

Whitt was having those familiar nervous palpitations as he approached Tox on the third floor of the University of Sydney west car park.

'I got the CCTV,' Whitt said, drawing a sheet of paper from the folder tucked under his arm. He handed Tox a grainy photograph printed from the security system of a hock shop in Bondi Junction. Whitt had managed to track down footage of the purchase of the video camera found in Sam Blue's apartment, originally stolen from an apartment in Elizabeth Bay. The still showed a man in a cap exiting the front doors of the store.

'It's not a great picture,' Whitt said.

'No. It's not,' Tox sighed. 'Could be Sam Blue. Could be his grandmother.'

'I'm going to get it analysed,' Whitt said. 'See if we can measure the man's dimensions against the angle of the camera and the doorway. He seems taller than Blue to me.'

'You talk to the Simpson girl?'

'Yes.'

'Convinced?'

Whitt struggled. 'She maintains everything from her last statement.

The white van. The screaming. Caitlyn standing there as she ran past.'

'We'll soon find out,' Tox said.

Whitt took a deep breath and looked around at the car park. They walked to the door to the fire stairs. Was this where Caitlyn McBeal had taken her last breaths of free air?

And if it was, would she ever take any again?

Chapter 54

‘THIS IS WHERE both girls allegedly entered,’ Whitt said, walking through the fire-escape door. He glanced down the stairwell. ‘I suppose the abductor might have seen Linny coming up the stairs. Decided she was his type. Thought he’d stand here, wait for her to come through.’ He walked back through the door and leaned against the wall, made like he was ready to pounce. ‘Linny comes through. He grabs her, drags her that way, over to where that white van is sitting.’

Whitt pointed to a car space fifty metres away where a white van sat with the side door open. He paused, puzzled at the sight of it sitting there, the very same make and model of vehicle the witness had described in her interviews. Tox had his hands in his pockets. He looked nonchalantly towards the van.

‘So what we want to know is,’ Tox said, ‘how likely is Linny’s story? Why did no one hear her screams and then Caitlyn being abducted? Would the attacker have been able to drag Caitlyn fifty metres to the van? Where and how might he have left traces of the crime if he did?’

Whitt was still puzzled by the van. He looked at Tox. ‘That’s the same kind of van Linny reported seeing at the abduction,’ Whitt said.

‘Uh-huh.’ Tox nodded. ‘It’s my van. I brought it here for the purposes of our experiment.’

‘What experiment?’

Tox didn’t answer. He was watching a woman walking towards them up the slope of the ramp, her enormous spike heels clapping like horseshoes on the asphalt. Whitt’s first thought was that university students sure dressed differently now to the way they did when he studied. As she got closer, however, Whitt began to notice bruises on her slender white legs, climbing all the way to the hem of the tiny miniskirt. The long blonde ponytail was clearly fake – clipped-in extensions. She put the phone she’d been texting on away in a small faux-fur handbag and smiled broadly at Tox.

‘Detective Barnes,’ she said, hardly glancing at Whitt. ‘It’s been a long time, honey.’

‘Sure has.’ Tox looked warm and friendly, Whitt thought. A sudden transformation of his usually dark being. Something was not right. ‘Whitt, this is Sandy. Sandy, Whitt.’

‘This is a bit of a weird place for a two-on-one,’ Sandy smirked uneasily, looking around the car park. ‘Are we getting out of here, or ...?’

‘Oh no, we’ll play our game right here,’ Tox said. He checked his watch. There was a strange, tight pause as the man simply stood there, smiling at the girl’s face. Whitt opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but before he could Tox lunged at the girl, grabbing her by both arms, yanking her towards him.

‘You’re coming with me, girly!’ Tox snarled.

‘Whoa!’ Whitt stumbled backwards. ‘Whoa! Whoa!’

‘What are you doing?’ Sandy screamed. ‘What are you doing! Help! Help!’

The girl in Tox’s arms suddenly sprang to life, bucking and twisting in his grip. The two of them fell into the side of a parked car.

Whitt launched himself forwards, trying to wrestle the girl from Tox’s grip as he dragged her towards the van. Her screaming was so loud up close that his eardrums pulsed.

‘Please! Stop! Help me!’

‘Stop, Tox! Let her go!’

Tox threw his weight sideways, knocking Whitt into another car, sending his glasses skidding across the asphalt. Sandy twisted in Tox’s arms, bashed at his head with her forearms. He stopped and adjusted his grip, hugged her to him like a child and loped in the direction of the van with her howling against his chest.

‘In you go!’ he laughed triumphantly, placing Sandy in the cabin of the van and slamming the door. Sandy was screaming, beating on the door with her fists. Whitt limped towards Tox, his lower back aching from slamming into the side mirror of a nearby Toyota.

‘What the hell is wrong with you? Let her out of there!’

‘Fifty seconds,’ Tox said, glancing at his watch. He pushed the door of the van open and Sandy got out. She slapped Tox hard across the side of the head.

‘You asshole!’ she panted. ‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’

‘It was just a game, sweetheart.’ Tox reached out and took her shoulders in his big, calloused hands, smoothed her arms. ‘That’s all. No need to get your pretty feathers all ruffled.’

‘You’re crazy,’ Sandy huffed and tried to assess the damage the struggle had done to her artificial hair. ‘You’ve always been a crazy fuck.’ She slapped him again, hard, across the face.

Tox peeled a couple of hundreds off of a roll he produced from his pocket. Sandy snatched the bills and tucked them into her bra, held her hand out for more. Tox sighed and peeled again. Sandy frowned at Whitt.

‘Great load of help you were,’ she snapped, jutting her chin at Whitt. ‘Was this your idea? You some kinda freak who likes to watch abductions?’

‘No, no,’ Whitt protested. ‘I really –’

‘What the hell was that all for?’

‘I needed a screamer,’ Tox said. ‘A real screamer. Not someone faking it. We’re being scientists today, darling.’

Sandy looked unconvinced. A man in a grey uniform was running up the slope towards them, his hand on his belt.

‘What’s going on?’ He wiped at a sweaty head of black hair. ‘Who’s in trouble?’

‘You are,’ Tox said.

Chapter 55

‘I’M DETECTIVE INSPECTOR Tate Barnes and this is Detective Inspector Edward Whittaker.’ Tox paused when he got to Sandy. ‘And this is ... our associate. We’re investigating the abduction of Caitlyn McBeal.’

‘Oh,’ the man said. He brushed at the front of his grey uniform, fiddled with a name badge that read *Bill Perkins: Security*.

‘William Perkins. You’re the security guard who gave police a statement about that day, aren’t you?’ Tox folded his arms.

‘Yes.’

‘Interesting.’ Tox glanced at the sunshine streaming in through the side of the lot. ‘Same day of the week. Same hour of the day that Caitlyn was apparently abducted. Wind direction seems to be more or less the same. You hear the screams of a woman, screams that last fifty seconds and you come running.’

‘Yes.’ Bill shifted uncomfortably.

‘You were down there in your little security guard’s hut on the first floor just now, were you?’

‘Uh-huh.’ Bill cleared his throat.

‘That’s where you said you were at the time of Caitlyn’s alleged abduction.’

‘Yep.’

‘So all the variables are the same as they were on that day. But you said in your statement that you didn’t hear any screams,’ Tox said. ‘You said you heard no screams, no scuffle on the third floor. You said you didn’t see a white van exit the driveway anywhere around that time.’

The security guard looked intently at Sandy. She was the safe place to look. Whitt and Tox’s eyes bored into the man’s face, assessing every muscle twitch.

‘Were you where you were supposed to be on that day, Mr Perkins?’

‘Yes.’ Bill straightened. ‘I was.’

‘Really?’ Whitt raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes.’

‘What if, for example ...’ Tox mused. ‘What if I took your head, Bill Perkins, and I put it in the gap of the sliding door of my van here.’ He gestured to the van. ‘And I slammed the door closed, over and over?’

Bill swallowed, looked at Whitt for help. There was none.

‘Would your answer still be the same?’ Tox asked.

Bill started to back up, then turned and ran.

‘Answer the question!’ Tox called. The security guard put his head down and ran for his life. Tox sighed, pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one.

‘He wasn’t in the guard hut that day,’ he exhaled. ‘I don’t know where he was, but he wasn’t there.’

Chapter 56

AFTER SANDY LEFT them, the two men walked to the edge of the car park and leaned on the concrete wall, Tox smoking, Whitt trying to contain his inner horror at his partner's 'experiment'. They looked over the edge and across a wide, empty netball court to a narrow green lawn where students were filming interviews with handycams, sitting on wooden benches, now and then glancing at written notes as they narrated their works.

'Maybe Bill the Security Idiot was in the bathroom,' Tox mused. 'Maybe he has a girlfriend on campus he was visiting. Maybe he was listening to music. Whatever the case, it's possible Linny Simpson was telling the truth. Someone did try to abduct her, and she screamed her head off, and no one heard her.'

Whitt didn't know if that made him feel better or worse.

'But the van doesn't make sense,' Whitt reminded him. 'No white van came or went during the times Caitlyn would have been taken.'

'Where is she?' Tox growled. 'If we could just find her, this would all make sense.'

The two men watched the people on the lawn below them.

'What are these chumps up to?' Tox wondered aloud. Whitt looked across the lot at the young people with their cameras.

'Film class, looks like.'

'Maybe they have some footage from that day.' Tox blew smoke into the wind.

'They'd have heard the screaming though,' Whitt said. 'Wouldn't they?'

'Not with those headphones on,' Tox said.

Whitt followed nervously as Tox descended the concrete stairs to the little garden. The students stopped their filming and assessed Tox as he arrived among them. Four of them were gathered around a single camera, thick headphones clamped to their heads. They took down the headphones.

'S'up?' Tox jutted his chin at the leader of the group, a lanky late-teenager with a shaving rash and long, greasy dreadlocks.

'Nothing much,' the boy answered.

'What's this?' Tox gestured to the group, the cameras.

'Film assignment.'

'Been doing it long?'

'A few months. It's our major assessment task. It's due next week.'

'Hmm.' Tox rocked on his heels. 'Let me look at it.' 'What?'

'I want to look at it.'

'Why?'

'Because I said so.' Tox shrugged, the gentle, menacing shrug of a dangerous man. 'Let me look at it.'

Whitt cleared his throat. He understood why Tox was being mysterious with the youths. If there was footage relevant to the abduction of Caitlyn McBeal, Tox and Whitt would need to confiscate it. And that would take a warrant, and a warrant would take time. A search of the students' footage was technically illegal. Whitt didn't like all the muscling Tox was doing. But he couldn't bring himself to stop what was about to happen. His personal and professional ethics were slowly, slowly degrading.

'We don't have to show you anything,' the dreadlocked boy said. Tox didn't reply. He reached out and grabbed the nearest handycam, plucking it from the grip of a young woman with green hair. He stood in the sun and started pushing buttons on the screen, flipping through dates on the digital files. The students exchanged glances, wide-eyed. Whitt held his hand out apologetically to another handycam holder. The young man gave a confused glance to their leader and then handed over the camera.

'Who are these guys?' someone whispered.

'Should we ... call someone?'

'What's this all about?' one of the girls asked Whitt. 'We've got permits. We're not doing anything wrong.'

'We'll just be a minute,' Whitt said gently. 'I'm really sorry.'

'Any footage of drug-taking on those cameras is strictly staged,' one of the young people said, eyes on the sky. 'We're making a ... public awareness film.'

'Got it.' Tox showed Whitt his camcorder screen. 'Ten July. Three pm.'

The two men huddled together, watching the students' interview on the tiny screen. The camera faced the car park exit, the driveway at the corner of the image. Anticipation churned in Whitt's chest.

Tox fast-forwarded the footage. The girl on the screen twisted and shivered, her mouth jabbering silently. She was wearing headphones too, doing a sound check. A dark green sedan exited the car park. The footage ended.

The two men exhaled. The students around them seemed to sense that whatever they were looking for was not on their footage. Tox handed the tiny camera back to the girl he'd taken it from.

'Thanks, guys.' Whitt smiled. They turned and started wandering away, but after only a few steps he stopped. There was a zinging feeling creeping up from his fingertips. A flush of heat in his throat

that even he didn't know the cause of at first. Suddenly, he realised. It all fell into place. He gripped his partner's arm.

Chapter 57

‘WHAT?’ TOX GRUNTED.

Whitt’s mind was rushing. He struggled to form words.

‘What?’ Tox repeated.

‘How do we know it was a white van?’ Whitt asked.

‘Linny Simpson said the guy tried to drag her into a white van.’

‘But has anyone else ever said that? Has there ever been a white van connected with the other missing girls?’

‘Well ...’ Tox thought about it. ‘No.’

‘It’s always a white van, isn’t it?’ Whitt’s heart was beginning to race in his chest. ‘In the movies. People are always abducted into black or white vans. What if Linny Simpson was right about everything that happened to her *except* the vehicle?’

Whitt closed his eyes. Remembered Linny sitting before him at the cafe table.

‘She said the van door was closed,’ he looked at Tox. ‘When the guy, the abductor dragged her over to the van, he didn’t manage to get her into the back of the vehicle. It was closed. That doesn’t make sense.’

‘Why not?’

‘He’d have left it open. Surely he didn’t plan to grab her, drag her all the way over to the van, drop her on the ground and expect her to lie there while he pulled the door open.’

‘How sure was she that the van door was closed?’ Tox asked. ‘She took a blow to the head. She fainted afterwards. That’s one of the main reasons the police rejected her story, because they think she was confused.’

Whitt shrugged helplessly. Tox considered Whitt’s words. Then he walked back to the group of students and plucked up the camera again.

‘Hey, we need that!’ one of the girls cried. ‘It’s due next week!’

‘It’s worth a shot,’ Tox said. ‘Let’s get a BOLO on the green sedan. See what turns up.’

Whitt was rubbing the bridge of his nose as they ascended the fire stairs, a headache pulsing behind his eyes.

‘Oh shit!’ he said. ‘My glasses!’

He jogged up the stairs, remembering the clatter of his glasses as Tox knocked him sideways in the struggle for Sandy. He searched between the cars, bent low and looked under greasy tyres. He spotted them deep under a blue Camry. Before he could get down, Tox put a

hand on his chest.

‘Not in that fancy outfit.’

Whitt watched as Tox crawled under the car, dragging himself forwards on his belly on the asphalt. He seemed to linger under the vehicle a little too long, the legs of his filthy jeans unmoving.

‘You alright under there?’

Tox scrambled out from under the car, threw the glasses at Whitt’s chest. He jogged around the back of the Camry, head low and eyes narrowed, like a hound.

‘What is it?’

‘This channel,’ Tox said. ‘This drainage channel.’

He pointed to a narrow drainage channel cut into the asphalt, covered with a blackened and oil-covered grille. Tox all but dove under a car two down from where they had stood. Whitt heard the scrape of iron.

Tox reappeared, grinning triumphantly, smeared with grease, and holding a broken phone.

Chapter 58

IT WAS TIME to go. Time to risk it all. Caitlyn had tried to bargain with her captor. She'd tried to reason with him. Hell, she'd even tried sympathising with him, attempting to understand the kind of sickness a mind like his must have. She understood that she had become an animal to him. An inconvenient pet. He didn't speak to her. His eyes hardly ever found hers anymore. He was beginning to feed her only every second day. It was clear to Caitlyn that her captor didn't know what to do with her now. She wouldn't survive waiting for him to decide. This was it. She would have to put everything on the line. Fight or die.

Fighting meant lying as still as she could on her belly in the middle of the floor, the wine bottles smashed all around her. The sour, eggy smell of expired alcohol was making her eyes water. She lay for hours before she heard the footsteps in the corridor. Hesitant, soft. She heard him shifting back the things he used to block the doorway, the scrape and thump of the biggest thing, the rattling and jangling of the smaller things. His hands on the locks. Caitlyn closed her eyes and eased a long breath into her aching lungs, let it slip through her lips. *Softly, softly*, she thought. If she screwed this up, it was all over.

She felt no fear. One way or another, it was about to be over.

Chapter 59

I SAT UP in my fold-out bed on Snale's porch, listening to the sounds of the night-birds and clicking away at my laptop. I was sending enquiries about Sam's case. Whitt had emailed a list of leads that he and Tox were working on. A green sedan. A broken phone. The fight with Jace Robit's people, and the optimistic tone of Whitt's email, had lit a fire in me. Earlier, I'd managed to get a fifteen-minute phone conversation with Sam, and my brother sounded healthy, and calm despite the catcalls in the background. I sent a request to my chief, Pops, to have the security guard from the car park re-interviewed by Nigel's team. I wanted to get in touch with the detectives in the Gold Coast chasing down sightings of Caitlyn McBeal, to find out if there was any truth to the rumours.

From a thin mattress on the floor beside my bed, Zac Taby spoke up, breaking my concentration.

'So you work on the town's case all day, and you work on your brother's case all night,' he said.

'Uh-huh.'

'When do you sleep?'

'Sleep is for losers.'

'True.'

The Taby parents had been mortified first that their son had escaped lockdown at their house, then that he'd been chased like a dog by people from the town. They had been happy to turn him over to us.

'If my typing is keeping you awake, you're welcome to move your mattress away from mine,' I told the boy. 'No one invited you to sleep this close to me. Frankly, it's weird.'

'No way, man,' the boy said. 'I'm stickin' next to you. You're my guard dog now. You whooped some freakin' arse out there. I'm not leaving your side for nothin'.'

I didn't know whether to feel flattered or annoyed by my description as a 'guard dog'. It had a certain truth to it. I'd have liked to be a guard dog. Unthinking, unquestioning, a loyal hound who followed someone I loved at all hours of the day, searching for threats and receiving treats in return for my service. It seemed a blessedly uncomplicated life.

I heard a grunting, snuffling sound, and Jerry the pig appeared in the doorway to the living room. The huge animal tested the air with its snout a few times as Zac and I watched. Then it lumbered with

effort down the single stair onto the porch and took up residence by the teenager's side, crashing to the ground, a mountain of hairy flesh falling. It seemed the coolest place to sleep that night was by my side.

'How much did you say all that gold was worth?' Zac asked, his chin resting on his hands on the pillow. The boy had found the rocks on Snale's kitchen table and marvelled at our explanation for them, his mouth hanging open and eyes wide. He'd watched us stash them away behind a handful of books in Snale's living room cabinets.

'About eighty thousand bucks, I think.'

'We could just, like ... take it.' His voice was low, conspiratorial.

'What?'

'Why not?' He rolled onto his side. 'You and me. We could split it. Get the fuck outta this lame-ass town.'

I laughed aloud. 'That's a nice fantasy you've got there, but forty thousand dollars isn't a lot of ... money.' My words faltered. I was wrong. To some people, it was a lot of money. It was enough for my mother to sell out her only son to the press. To endanger his life, possibly contribute to his eternal damnation, at least in the eyes of the public. It wasn't the kind of money you could run away forever on, though. Or was it? What kind of plans did this young man have? How far was far enough from his miserable life in this loveless town?

'If we stayed together, though, it'd be eighty,' he mused, a smile playing about his lips.

'Oh, right,' I smirked. 'I see. You and me, a dusty old convertible, running away across the country together. Staying in dodgy hotels, escaping our problems in each other's arms.'

'Hell yes!'

'Please,' I sighed. 'I'm old enough to be your mother.'

'Isn't that kind of hot, though?'

I slid a leg out from under the blanket and kicked him in the side.

'Shut up, idiot boy.'

Chapter 60

THE BOY FELL asleep quickly, undisturbed by the pig's snores. I lay on my side in the dark, eyes open, staring at the wall. Soon enough, I sighed and picked up my phone, sent a text.

If you refuse the magazine interview, I'll pay you fifty thousand, I wrote. I can't let you sabotage Sam's defence.

I waited. In time, the phone vibrated in my hands and the screen lit my face.

How soon can you get it? my mother asked.

I'll transfer it tomorrow, I wrote.

I'd prefer it in cash, she replied.

I'll bet, I thought.

Chapter 61

I DIDN'T KNOW I had fallen asleep until the sound came, a wailing, blaring siren that rang in my skull. I shot up and shoved the laptop and phone aside, almost stumbled over the pig on the ground next to Zac's empty mattress. Kash's bare feet thudded on the polished boards of the living room as he rushed out from the front of the house in only boxer shorts, struggling with his glasses. Lights flickered on.

'What is it?'

'A car horn.' He was actioning his pistol.

'Where's Zac?'

'What's happening?' Snale ran out of the bedroom in pink pyjamas covered in smiling, dancing pigs.

I sprinted through the house and out the front door, my partners in tow.

Zac was sitting in the driver's seat of Snale's four-wheel drive, leaning on the horn, flashing the high beams. His huge eyes followed me, front teeth locked together.

'What is it?' I called. 'What? What?'

I reached for the driver's side door beside him but he screamed before I could pull the handle.

'Don't!' he cried through the glass, hands flat, palms out, surrendered. 'Don't touch anything! Look! Look!'

He grabbed a sheet of paper from where it had been stuck with tape to the steering wheel. He pressed the paper against the glass.

The words were handwritten. They read 'DON'T GET OUT.'

Chapter 62

THEY SAT IN Whitt's car on the edge of Parramatta Road, the hammering of rain on the roof the only sound they could hear. Though the engine was off, Tox's hard hands gripped the steering wheel. His head was bent forwards and his jaw set, his eyes focused on the patterns the rain made on the windscreen. Whitt watched him. He could hardly see the man breathing. His own heart hadn't stopped pounding since they'd stood in the little park inside the university. With the camera in his hands, the sound off, he sat watching the green sedan emerge from the car park driveway at the edge of the footage. There was only a shadow behind the wheel. A pair of white hands pulling the steering wheel sideways calmly, turning the vehicle left towards the science district.

'It could be nothing,' Whitt warned. 'When the lab traces the phone's serial number they might find it just belongs to some other student. Someone who dumped it there on purpose or dropped it as they were getting out of their car.'

'It's Caitlyn McBeal's phone,' Tox insisted. 'It's broken because she broke it in the struggle as she was being abducted.'

Whitt sighed.

'The green sedan,' he continued. 'It might just be a student leaving for the day.'

'It's the killer,' Tox said. 'Leaving with Caitlyn McBeal.'

A search on the green sedan's registration had found it was stolen. Whitt told himself that didn't mean anything. Students could drive stolen cars. Buy them, sell them, steal them, trade them – students and old cars had a chequered relationship. It could just have been a coincidence that the sedan was leaving the lot mere moments after Caitlyn was allegedly abducted. As much as he tried to tell himself they were probably onto nothing, Whitt couldn't help but feel a flutter inside him that maybe that was wrong. When Tox's phone chimed, the two men grabbed for it at the same time.

'They've got the car,' Whitt said, motioning for his partner to start the engine. 'It's outside the old Pinkerton Hotel. Let's go.'

Chapter 63

CAITLYN HEARD HIS footsteps near her. Shuffling, despondent, probably relieved that she had finally expired quietly and without mess. He'd won. His game hadn't been a fast, violent, painful end for her but a drawn-out one, one in which she would have had to actually give up, cell by biological cell, and let death take her. Now he had her remains to leave here or dispose of as he pleased.

His foot against her shoulder, shoving experimentally, once, and then again. She was limp. It wasn't hard to relax her limbs completely. Just to stay awake was an effort, had been for weeks. She let the darkness take her, little by little.

She heard him groan as he crouched.

Yes, Caitlyn thought. *A little closer now.*

Hidden between her chest and the ground, Caitlyn clutched the chunky hexagonal fixture at the end of the long, thin steel rod she had extracted from one of the old beer kegs. The weapon was blunt, rusty, but it was all she had. She balled her fist around the handle as she felt his breath on the back of her neck.

Chapter 64

‘OH MY GOD,’ I stammered, reading the note in Zac’s hand. He pointed desperately to the back seat. I stepped sideways and looked in. There were three huge propane gas bottles sitting like round white passengers strapped into the seatbelts. I put my hands on the glass and Zac put his on the other side, staring into my eyes, terror making his whole body shake.

‘I didn’t see the note until I got into the car!’ he screamed. ‘I didn’t see the gas bottles!’

‘I know,’ I shouted. ‘I know. It’s OK. It’s OK.’

I looked to my partners. Snale was standing well back, her hands over her mouth. Kash was circling the car, looking in the windows. He dropped to the ground in front of the engine and examined the underside of the car. Both were panting like me, the adrenaline rushing so fast through my veins I could hardly think. My mind split into fragments, thoughts racing in different directions. Three or four times the ludicrous impulse jabbed at me to just open the door and pull the kid out.

‘Don’t panic!’ I called, unable to keep the fear out of my own voice. My mind was begging me now to get away from the car. There was no telling when it would explode, what might cause it to go off. I stopped touching the windows. ‘Just. Just, uh. Oh God! Just don’t panic!’

I looked at Kash, and the expression on his face didn’t settle me. The back of his hand was against his mouth like he might be sick. He came to the driver’s window, his steps shaky, uneven.

‘What happened when you got in?’ he shouted.

‘I heard a click when I sat down,’ Zac called, his voice muffled by the glass. ‘Like a, like a, a sound like things snapping into place!’

‘Can you hear anything now? Like a ticking or a whirring? Anything?’

‘I don’t know! I’m scared! Don’t leave me here! Please!’

The boy burst into tears. On the front passenger seat beside him I could see the black plastic and duct-taped package. He’d tried to sneak out with the gold. Tried to take off, into the glorious sunrise, a ridiculous bid for a new life that could cost him his current one.

I backed up a couple of steps with Kash, my hands gripping my hair. ‘What is it?’

‘It could be a number of things.’ He licked his sweaty upper lip. ‘We know from the bomb on the hillside that the killer’s new at this. So

I'm leaning away from complex chemical-reaction devices. It's probably a circuit-breaker. Mercury tilt-switch, maybe.'

'What? What the fuck? How do we disarm it?'

'I need to know more about it,' he said. The big man before me was trembling gently all over, but his face was hard with focus. 'It might be connected to the seat. It might be connected to the doors.'

'How much time do we have?'

'There's no telling. We need to find out if there's a timer and what kind.'

'You figure that out,' I said. 'I'm going to do a quick lap around the immediate area. This is a spectacle. There's no way the killer would miss this.'

I dashed towards the house, wincing as I heard Zac call out after me.

'Don't leave me!' he screamed. 'I don't want to die!'

Chapter 65

CAITLYN ROLLED, USING the momentum to push herself up, her shoulder, arm, hand shooting upwards, the metal rod flashing out. There was less resistance than she anticipated. The end of the rod went straight into his eye socket, seemed to shudder as it cleaved through bone and came to rest in his brain.

She got up and staggered back as the man groaned and flopped away from her, limp as a fish. He lay there on his back, the rod sticking grotesquely from his head, bloodless, his mouth agape. Caitlyn shivered, her eyes darting over his ragged clothes and filthy boots, the long thin tendrils of grey and brown hair running from the sides of his otherwise bald scalp.

A homeless man. One of the people who must have come into the hotel and left the trash she'd seen in the hall. She could hear that it was raining hard, now that the door to her prison room was open.

She stumbled, trying not to gag, her stomach rebelling against the sensation now cemented in her memory of the rod going up, the breath coming out of her victim. Fighting her revulsion, there was a white-hot excitement pulsing through her at the sight of the dark gaping doorway. She could feel sobs pushing their way up her throat but couldn't hear them. Her ears were ringing. It seemed an age before her hand finally reached the doorframe and she looked down the long hall.

He was there.

Eyes fixed on the unlocked door, flicking now to her face.

Caitlyn's captor marched towards her.

Chapter 66

I DIDN'T WANT to leave Zac. But I knew if I could find the killer, I could force him to tell us how to disarm the bomb. My teeth were gritted as I bolted into the house and grabbed my gun, Snale running after me with the diary from the kitchen table. The rage rippling up through my throat was almost a growl. I was going to find this sick fuck and make him reverse the trap he'd put the child in. If I had to beat him to within an inch of his life to make that happen, I would do it.

I ran across Snale's porch and through the back door into the yard, keeping low so that my silhouette didn't appear against the lights of the house. My gun drawn, I did a sweep, squinting in the dark, then hopped over a fence into the next property. I could still hear Zac's crying from the windswept fields. Around Snale's property, lights were coming on. As the seconds passed, more lights appeared in the distance as residents called each other, panicked, in the night.

'Come on, you fuck,' I seethed. 'Where are you?'

I rushed across the road and through the property opposite Snale's, making for the tiny house in the centre of the barren field. As I leapt up onto the porch a woman emerged, a young mother, small children trailing behind her. She screamed at the sight of me.

'I'm police,' I said. 'Are you alright? Have you seen anyone in the area?'

'No, no.' The woman tried to usher her kids back through the screen door but they resisted, mouths gaping at my gun. 'We heard screaming. What's happening?'

'Get inside,' I said. 'Shut the door.'

'It's all gonna come out.' She shook her head ruefully, trembling before me, her hands gripping the small children by the shoulders of their pyjama shirts like they might run off at any second. 'It's all coming to an end.'

'What?' I squinted at her. 'What's that mean?'

She disappeared inside the house. I kept moving, doing a lap of her house, the next field, sweat sliding down my neck and ribs. When I got back to Snale's house she was on her knees in the light of the doorway, flipping through the diary as Kash tried to get sense out of Zac.

'Did you find anyone?'

'No,' I knelt beside Snale. 'What did you find?'

'I think it's this.' She pointed to a messy diagram in blue and red

ink. 'I think it's connected to the seat. If he gets up, it'll blow.'

I grabbed the diary and took it to Kash, who was standing on his toes with another torch, trying to see down the back of Zac's seat.

'Oh Jesus.' Zac panted, his sweat-drenched hands squeaking on the other side of the glass, fingers spread, desperate. 'Jesus Christ, I think I can hear ticking.'

Kash snatched the diary out of my hands, glanced at the diagram. 'Thought so. Circuit-breaker. It's linked to the driver's seat. We can open the doors.'

'Don't open the doors!' Zac cried. 'I don't wanna die! Oh God! Please!'

'Let's go with the front passenger side,' Kash said. 'Just in case.'

We ran to the other side of the car. Kash pushed me back.

'I'll do it.'

He eased the handle of the passenger door out. There was a click. My mouth was dry as I cringed, waiting for the blast.

There was none. I rushed forwards to the doorway beside Kash, reached out and grabbed Zac's hands.

'It's OK.' I squeezed his hot fingers. 'Don't move. We're gonna figure this out.'

Kash leaned in the doorway, trying not to touch anything, and shone the light quickly around the seats, the console, the back of the cabin.

'Christ,' he breathed. 'It's all wired up under the seats. I can't get to it from this angle.' He stood back, kept his voice low. 'I can hear a timer ticking.'

'Can you see it?'

'No, it's tucked up underneath. All the wires are. I can't get at it unless I put my hand in there, and we have no idea where the switch is. If I disrupt the connection at the wrong point the thing will blow.'

We were walking unconsciously away from the car, taking steps out of the blast zone. Zac sat in the driver's seat, reaching for us, sobbing.

'Please don't go! Don't leave me here!'

'What can we do?'

'We can try to replace his weight on the seat,' Kash panted, looking wildly at the house. 'It'd have to be at least the same weight as the boy. We don't know how sensitive the switch is. If it's too light it might -'

'I got it.' I ran towards the house. In the hall was a backpack hanging on a row of hooks cluttered with hats and coats. I grabbed it and sprinted into the living room, almost slipping on the floorboards, and dumped the contents of the bag on the floor. I grabbed at anything heavy and started shoving. Wine bottles. A huge dictionary. A cast-iron sculpture on a shelf. Things were crashing everywhere as I

went along. My hands were shaking so hard I could hardly use them. Zac's screams burned in my ears.

'I'm coming!' I screamed. 'I'm coming, Zac! Hold on!'

Chapter 67

CAITLYN'S KNEES BUCKLED beneath her. It was the only thing that saved her from his full arm swing, the punch sailing over her head as fear consumed her completely. She flopped against his legs, defeat turning her limbs to jelly. He grabbed her waist, hair, tried to get a hold of her. He was standing too close. Stepped back.

‘Stupid bitch,’ he snarled. He flipped her, hands beneath her arms, gripping painfully at the tender flesh. ‘Get back in there!’

It was the sight of the doorway that awakened the fury again in Caitlyn. The enormous sucking weight of the room beyond it. The hours, days, weeks she had lain awake in that concrete nightmare, dreaming of release. Her limbs suddenly hardened. She lifted her leg and slammed it into the doorframe, shocking him, sending them both staggering backwards.

‘No!’ she snarled, facing him, her body bent with pain and exhaustion. ‘Never again!’

She didn’t know how to fight. She’d never so much as been in a loud argument with a stranger. It was raw animal terror taking over now. Her hands sprang into claw-shapes, her jaw set and teeth bared. She threw herself at his middle with all her might. They hit the ground hard, his legs coming up and around her waist, arms and hands gripping at her face. She let him pull her into his embrace, bit some part of him hard through his shirt – his shoulder or upper chest. She was blinded, wild, tugging at his face and ears, scratching at his eyes.

He rolled and she was suddenly free, stumbling into the walls. She ran as though through water, trying to pull herself along. His footsteps pounded after her.

Chapter 68

I RAN OUT the front door of Snale's house, stumbled, caught myself and rushed to the passenger-side door of the four-wheel drive with my arms full of the bag. Snale was standing on the lawn not far away, her face twisted in anguish. Kash stood dazed, his hands by his sides. The bag in my arms was spewing items. I dumped it on the passenger-side seat. The kid was wide-eyed, teeth chattering, his legs drawn up and arms gripping the ceiling of the car. Shock and terror.

'Zac, slide this between your legs. Don't get up until it's on the seat,' I stammered. 'I ... I think it's heavy enough. I think ...'

I remembered seeing a loose house brick by the front door. Zac grabbed the bag. I turned towards the house, stepped back, already twisting, already seeing the brick in my hand, only metres away.

I heard the timer scream.

Chapter 69

HE WAS BEHIND her. Right behind her – his fingers tangled in the very ends of her hair, yanking some of it free. Caitlyn ran through the labyrinth of halls searching for light, seeing only boarded-up windows and locked and barred doors. What floor were they on? What time of day was it? A part of her frantic brain throbbed with denial that any of this was real. She had dreamed so many times of escape. Part of her wanted to stop pushing her body, lie down, give in, wake again in the cellar room where she belonged. Her whole life outside the room had been a dream. She had no mother, no job, no apartment. She'd been born in these dark depths. She needed to stop fighting.

The exhaustion was hard to push back as she reached the stairs, a mountain of chipped and splintered wood reaching into more dark space. Just as she leapt forwards, he grabbed her ankle, yanked her down. Her chin hit the bottom stair hard, cracking her teeth. Caitlyn grabbed one of the banister rails and it snapped free in her hand. It was light, rotten and damp, but she threw it anyway, causing him to release his hold. She hurled herself up the stairs and turned right, no idea where it might lead.

Caitlyn's only terror now was running into a dead end. If she was cornered, she knew she would not be able to fight on. Already her knees and hips were aching, threatening to fail. She could hear him breathing, looked back and saw no one there. She tried a door and found it locked. He must be circling around to find her, using another set of stairs. Caitlyn screamed for help, banging on doors. The rain was leaking through the ceiling here. She shoved hard against a door and fell into the wet street.

The light was blinding. Caitlyn crawled towards the blurry, distant road, trying to find the breath to scream. People were there, walking back and forth, streaks of colour in her ruined vision. She called out, but no one turned. Her voice was gone.

She felt a hard hand encircle her arm and yank her backwards.

Chapter 70

THE STREET WAS flooded with people. I was aware first of voices shouting and footsteps hammering the earth nearby, hands on my body, dragging me, pulling me, lifting my head. I was trapped in a dream, being ravaged by a mob. I opened my mouth and tried to draw air but my ribs felt flattened.

I lay assessing my injuries. I'd hit the back of my head hard. My left radius was broken. And if I didn't get some air soon, I'd be able to add collapsed lungs to my list. I opened my eyes and watched the stars turning around and around against the blackened sky until Kash's face interrupted them. There was a hose in his hand.

His big hand was on my head. I realised he was hosing me. I could feel the cold water rushing down my shoulders and over the backs of my arms. My clothes were drenched.

'It's only flash burn,' he was saying. 'Don't worry. You're fine.'

'Zac,' I coughed. I tried to sit up. The four-wheel drive was on fire. People were standing all around it, their mouths open and eyes wide in the dark, watching the flames four, five metres high. The roof of the vehicle was twisted backwards like the lid of a tin can, the doors nowhere to be seen.

'Don't move.' Kash tried to force me down. 'You were thrown quite a distance. You could have a spinal injury.'

'Is he in there?' I asked. Kash didn't answer. 'Did the kid make it out?'

More voices above me. The grass beneath me felt cool, welcoming, its soft green fingers reaching up over my wrists, dragging me down. I let my head loll to the side, looked at the crowd around the car lit by the flames. Gold masks.

At the edge of the gathering, nearest to me, I could make out Jace Robit and a slender woman, his wife, in her nightgown. A tall, shaggy friend of Jace's joined him, and then came the other two and their wives. Jace nudged his friend in the ribs and pointed to the car. Stuck out his hands, as though warming his palms, his face cracking with a grin.

Chapter 71

‘I’VE GOT YOU,’ the man growled, heaving Caitlyn up from the ground, a helpless bundle in his thick arms. ‘I’ve got you now, love.’

Caitlyn was so exhausted. Her head fell back against the man’s arm and she looked up at him. Shaggy blond hair, a hard face with dark, tired eyes. He was running with her, glancing back towards the building as he made for the street. ‘I’ve got her! Get a medic!’

‘Where is he?’ she asked. ‘Is he ... Is he ...’

‘I don’t know,’ the man said. ‘But he’s not here, and that’s all you need to know. I’m police. You’re safe with me. We’ll get the prick, don’t you worry about that.’

‘I killed a man,’ Caitlyn whispered. Sleep was pulling at her. There were people all around them now, faces appearing at the man’s shoulders as they pushed through. Sirens wailing.

‘What?’

‘I killed someone,’ Caitlyn said.

‘Yeah?’ The blond man gave a crooked smile. ‘Welcome to the club, sweetheart.’

Chapter 72

I WAS IN a tiny cubicle lined with pale green curtains, lying stiff as a rod under hot white lights. I jolted as I felt hands around my throat, squeezing, hard fingers against my jaw. I reached up with my good arm and realised it was a plastic neck brace. The pain at the back of my head swelled and I groaned long and low, hoping someone would hear me and bring me drugs. Something was swimming in my system. Probably morphine. My eyes were running tears down my temples. Morphine always makes me cry.

I felt for the velcro strap at the side of my neck.

‘Don’t even think about it.’ Kash’s voice. He pulled my hand away. ‘You haven’t had your X-ray yet.’

The television in the corner was playing some game show. A plump, middle-aged woman was jumping up and down in excitement, apparently having chosen well from a selection of gold briefcases being exhibited by tanned models.

‘Zac.’

‘He didn’t make it,’ Kash said.

I felt a *whump* of grief in the pit of my stomach, hard as the blow of a fist. Immediately the blame swirled, as it always did, a cacophony of voices roaring between my ears.

You should have known he’d steal the gold.

You should have listened when he told you he was running away.

You should have known Snale’s house was a target.

You should have saved him.

You should have saved him.

You should –

‘You were pretty lucky, stepping back like that just in time,’ Kash said. From the corner of my eye I could see he was watching the television. ‘You’ve got first-degree burns. They’re like a bad sunburn. They’ll be gone in a few days.’

I lifted my left arm and examined the dark blue cast running from the crook of my elbow to my knuckles. My wrist was shattered. I knew the feeling. Had done it before, taking a swing at someone and hitting a wall instead.

‘Where are we?’

‘White Cliffs hospital. Four hours out of Last Chance. Medevac picked us up.’

‘Are you OK? Is Vicky –’

‘Everyone’s fine,’ he said. ‘Except Zac.’

I lay sweating in the neck brace, listening to the game show host introducing the rules of the next round. There was forty thousand dollars on the line. A lot of money for some people. Enough to give a life for. Enough to die for. *Three more days, and I’ll be home, Sam.* I could last the distance, but not like this. Not lying here, staring at the lights.

I pulled off the neck brace. Kash didn’t stop me this time. Probably tired of my bullshit. I sat up and felt the stitches in the back of my skull, the bald patch shaved there.

‘What kind of bomb was it?’ I asked.

‘You shouldn’t worry about that right now.’

‘Just tell me.’

‘It was a circuit-breaker,’ Kash sighed. ‘Like I thought. Forensics have a few pieces of it that they’re examining. It was a more sophisticated job than the one that killed Theo Campbell, but not by much. There would have been two triggers. One was a pop-up hinge, like you see on kitchen cabinet doors, the flashy ones without handles. Instead of pulling the door open, you push it, it clicks and when you release it, the door pops open. You have to push again and hear the click for the door to close. The killer would have wired the hinge so that when Zac sat down it clicked and completed the circuit. If he’d have got off the seat, it would have popped open, breaking the circuit, setting off the bomb.’

‘Looks like the secondary trigger was a plastic kitchen timer that we heard ticking. You can get them at the supermarket for about three bucks. The whole thing would have cost little and been easy to source without raising suspicions.’

‘Still. Let’s check with the store in Last Chance and the surrounding towns and see if any kitchen timers have been bought recently, and by whom.’

‘The results on the IP searches across the valley have come back. No one teaching themselves to make bombs in the last year. We’ll need another warrant to go back further.’

‘Christ.’ I rubbed my eyes. ‘Why didn’t I think about someone targeting us? The first victim was the chief of police. Of course it makes sense they’d go after Snale next.’

‘It mightn’t necessarily have been Snale that they were after.’ Kash shrugged. ‘Maybe it was you or me. Maybe it actually was Zac.’

I lay back against the pillows and watched my partner watching the TV. His mouth was turned down and his eyes were set. He wasn’t his usual self. All the bravado, all the heroic puff had left his voice. He seemed drained. When he spoke, I realised why.

‘I know you spoke to Tenacity,’ he said.

Chapter 73

I SAID NOTHING. My job as a Sex Crimes detective includes working with the utmost discretion at all times. A good majority of the victims I deal with don't want anyone to know what has happened to them, particularly their families. Confirming or denying that I knew Tenacity at all was completely against the rules. Kash seemed to know, didn't seem to care. He kept talking, turning the wedding ring on his finger around and around.

'You must have dealt with her after the assault,' he said. 'I know you can't say anything. She thinks I don't know. Her mother told me not long after it happened, said Tenacity didn't want me to know because she thought I'd probably turn it around, make it a part of my obsession. Well, she was right, of course. I just added it to the hatred I was already feeling. It spurred me on. I'd only just come back from a deployment in Afghanistan, and went right back as fast as I could. Stupid. So stupid.'

He stretched and settled in the seat, his long legs splayed before him. The woman on the television screen was dying of joy. She was up to seventy-five thousand dollars.

'That night in Kuta, in Bali,' Kash said. 'I'd only been out of the bar for about thirty seconds. I walked out to take a phone call from my mum. It was too loud in the bar. I got out the front doors, turned left and went over to stand on the street corner. I felt the pressure wave thump right through the middle of my body. I was actually knocked off my feet by it. I didn't even hear the bomb blast. I felt like I'd been hit by a car.'

He ran a hand through his hair. I sat watching, seeing him standing on the corner of the moonlit street hung with neon lights. People screaming.

'And then I look back and the whole place is on fire,' he said. 'And people are running out of it. Some of them are burning. Some of them were missing pieces. I was a surfer. I'd never seen anything like that. Not even in the movies. It was like I'd died suddenly and I'd awakened in hell. And I knew right away – whoever had caused this, *they* were from hell. They had to have been. Because this wasn't the sort of thing that happened on Earth.'

The woman on the game show was up to a hundred thousand dollars. A heat rash was creeping up her neck and cheeks. She wiped at her eyes, breathless. Kash watched her.

‘From then on, that’s how I saw it,’ he said. ‘I thought there were evil people, demons, walking around on the Earth, plotting to open up the ground and unleash their world on us. I had to fight them. Because if I didn’t fight them, what was the point of it all? I dropped everything. I went after them. I devoted my life. It was like my wife and my job and my family and my friends had never existed. I had a clear mission, with clear enemies, and that was all that mattered. And then last night ...’

He seemed to drift away. I waited.

‘Yesterday I was right back where it all started. Feeling the blast. The pressure wave. Staring at the flames.’

‘It’s not ...’ I struggled to find the words. ‘That time hasn’t been wasted. You’ve fought a good fight. There’s no way of knowing how many lives you’ve saved through your work.’

‘But I wanted to put a stop to the badness,’ he said. ‘In my mind, it would have all been over by now. There would be an end, and everything I had sacrificed would have been worth it. But badness is everywhere. There’s a little bit of hell on Earth, and you never know when you’re going to see it next.’

Chapter 74

‘TALK TO TENACITY,’ I said. I reached over and grabbed his hand. ‘Call her.’

We watched as the woman on the screen battled her emotions, trying to decide whether to risk her hundred grand for what was hidden inside the last briefcase. She was pulling on her neck, tugging her ears down, the weight of the decision seeming to physically force her downwards. She picked the mystery briefcase. Animated sad clown faces flitted and flashed across the screen as a ten-dollar note was revealed, taped to a board on the inside of the case.

Kash took out his phone and left me watching the woman crying on the screen.

Hell on Earth. I’d seen slivers of that place myself, seen its flames flicker in the eyes of bad men I’d sat across from in the interrogation room, listening to them confess their crimes. I’d seen evil intentions in the eyes of foster fathers who’d welcomed my brother and me into their damp, cluttered homes, television light glaring on the walls, the blank faces of other abandoned children peering from shadowed corners. I understood the realisation Kash had experienced as he stood watching Zac Taby’s body burn in the driver’s seat of Snale’s car, a decade and a half after he’d watched his friends burn among the remains of dozens of others on a terrible night in Kuta. Sometimes, it’s easy to get caught up in this job, to think that you’re getting on top of evil. That in some wonderful distant future there will be no terrorists. No killers. No rapists and fiends. A dream like that is worth sacrificing everything for. Love. Friends. Marriage. Kids. It seems worth the fight.

And then you realise that no matter what you throw on the flames, they keep on burning, mighty and unquenchable. The fight would in fact be eternal. Like Kash, I’d given my life over to my job. I breathed it. I obsessed over it, nurtured it, the way I should perhaps have been nurturing friendships, relationships, maybe children. That sort of stuff hardly occurred to me. And yet it was all other people lived for. Was that what had so strangely drawn me to the baby in Jed Chatt’s arms? I’d defied logic, crept close to a man who’d only minutes before held a gun on me, so that I could see a child’s eyes. Was something inside me whispering of things I was losing because I refused to believe the world needed to be as bad as it was?

Kash had lost his wife because of his commitment to the eternal fight. He needed to get her back.

I lay in the hospital bed and held my broken arm against my chest and wondered if I'd be happier if I stopped fighting.

I pulled out my IV, pushed aside the blankets and started untying my hospital gown. Two nurses were standing just outside my cubicle, chatting at the counter. As I tied my shoelaces, they wandered on. I snuck past them and made for the car park.

Fighting was all I was good at. I couldn't stop now.

Chapter 75

KASH WAS STANDING by a police cruiser loaned from White Cliffs to get us home. He was leaning on the driver's side door, talking gently into the phone. He straightened as he saw me.

'My partner's here,' he told the caller. 'I gotta go. Love you, too.'

'Love you too, huh?' I said.

'Force of habit.' He watched me approach. 'But it's the first time in a long time there were no raised voices. I'm assuming the nurses have not signed your official release.'

'They have not,' I said. 'So let's quit the small talk and get out of here.'

On the road in the darkness, the cruiser sailed over the asphalt between oceans of featureless desert sand. The sun was just beginning to light the horizon. I looked at my phone. There was a text from my mother telling me she'd got the money I'd transferred. No mention of her disappointment that it was not in cash. A call came through as I was looking at the screen. It was an unfamiliar number. I answered with trembling fingers.

'Hello?'

'It's Tox.'

'Oh,' I said. Tox was notoriously difficult to get on the phone, and even harder to converse with once the connection was made. His already-poor people skills seemed halved by the distance. My heart sank. 'What's happened?'

'We found Caitlyn McBeal,' he said.

I reeled, absurdly looking to Kash to see if he'd heard the news. My skin was tingling all over, and not just from the burns.

'Is she -'

'She's alive.'

'Jesus.' I sat bolt upright in my seat. 'Jesus! What's she saying?'

'Don't get excited. She's not saying much at all, and what she is saying doesn't sound good for you. She says a guy has been keeping her in a cellar for the last few months. Practically starving her to death. She thinks he's connected to Sam. A partner, maybe.'

'What do you mean, she thinks that?'

'I mean that's what she thinks.'

'Christ, Tox! Explain what you mean!' I tried not to yell. Every fibre of my being was telling me to scream. 'What exactly did she say?'

'She says he didn't touch her the whole time,' he grumbled. 'Didn't

rape her. Didn't torture her. Hardly looked at her. Just seemed to go on standby mode, almost like he didn't know what to do with her. Caitlyn thinks it's because Sam was arrested. She thinks they were a double act, and once Sam was gone, the guy who kept her lost interest.'

I shivered in my seat. The drugs were still in my system, making my mind fragmented, twitchy. Again I felt that magnetic pull towards my home. I needed to get back there. Speak to Caitlyn. Convince her that she was wrong. *Three days*. I'd go to her hospital room. Look her in the eyes.

'How ... I mean, what did he ...'

'I haven't got time to relate it all to you play by play,' Tox said. 'We're standing outside Caitlyn's hospital room, waiting to go in. Detective Nigel Fuckface is giving us fifteen minutes with her.'

'Who's the guy?' I gripped the phone tight. 'The guy who abducted Caitlyn. Did you catch him?'

'No, he slipped away,' Tox said. 'You'll see the sketch on the news in a couple of hours, I reckon.'

'But –'

The line went dead.

'Fuck!' I screamed long and loud, looking at the phone screen, Tox's number and the 'Call ended' message. He'd hung up on me. 'Fuck! FUCK!'

Chapter 76

WHITT AND TOX stood side by side, leaning against the wall outside Caitlyn McBeal's hospital room. A few metres down the hall from them, a group of detectives lingered, people from Sex Crimes and Major Crimes, some trauma-trained officers Whitt recognised from the Parramatta headquarters. Beyond them, at the nurses' station, a group of journalists had already assembled, arguing with three beat cops who held them back from the hall.

A photograph of Caitlyn McBeal in her current state would have been worth a lot of money, Whitt thought. It was guaranteed front-page news. Over the four and a bit months she had been held captive, Caitlyn had lost a good ten kilos, and her hair had thinned by half. The girl Tox had carried to the ambulance outside the abandoned Pinkerton Hotel had looked like a cancer patient. Sunken eyes and yellowed teeth, her neck and arms covered in bedsores. Her lips had been dry and cracked and bleeding. Tox had described finding her in the alley outside the hotel, desperately trying to crawl towards the street, the exertion of escaping her captor having reduced her almost to unconsciousness. The doctors were saying that, had the unfortunate homeless man Ronnie Hipwell not stumbled upon her makeshift prison cell and initiated her escape, she would have been mere days from death. It was both a miracle and a tragedy that Hipwell had ventured down to the lower basement level after rain flooding the ground floor had pushed aside the trash that had been obscuring the door leading downstairs. Caitlyn was free. Hipwell was dead.

Detective Nigel Spader emerged from the room and closed the door behind him, eyeing Tox suspiciously as he tucked his notebook into his back pocket.

'Five more minutes,' he said.

'You said that an hour ago,' Tox said.

'Yeah. Maybe I did. What are you going to do about it?'

'I'm going to go in there.' Tox stepped forwards, pointed at the door behind his fellow officer. 'And if you try to stop me, you'll find yourself downstairs in triage.'

'You're lucky you're getting access to the witness at all, Barnes,' Nigel spat. 'You are not on this task force. Neither of you are. And I can deny an interview any time I want.'

It was the first time Whitt had seen Tox almost lose his cool. 'Let me tell you a few things,' Tox said, jerking a thumb at Whitt. 'This two-

man investigation right here, we've got enough to get a mistrial and bail in the very least.'

'Bullshit.'

'We've traced the camera from Sam Blue's apartment to a hock shop in Bondi,' Tox started listing on his fingers, 'and we've got video of a man purchasing the camera who digital imaging analysts say is far too tall to be Blue. You yourself admitted that your people muscled Blue to extract the confession. We found Caitlyn McBeal's mobile phone at the crime scene *you guys* released. Your ten-man crack team of task force cockheads is going to look really stupid when the press gets wind of this. You need to fuck off and do some damage control, and leave Caitlyn McBeal to us.'

The bigger man had all but backed Nigel into the wall. Nigel shoved Tox's chest.

'Back the fuck up, murderer!'

'There's no need to be so hostile.' Whitt came between the two men. 'We're cooperating with you, Detective Spader. We let you know as soon as we had a lead on Caitlyn's possible whereabouts so that your officers could be on the scene if she was found. That was a goodwill gesture. Now return the favour and let us have our time with Caitlyn.'

'I don't know how good multiple interviews are for her right now,' Nigel mused, his eyes never leaving Tox. 'She's very fragile.'

'You know what else is fragile?' Tox said. 'Your neck.'

Tox and the much shorter detective stared at each other. The door to Caitlyn's room opened and another officer walked out. Whitt took the opportunity to slip through the gap as the door closed.

Chapter 77

THE ROOM WAS full of people. Caitlyn lay against the pillows, talking softly to a police EFIT specialist who sat beside her, scrolling through selections of eyebrows for the composite image of Caitlyn's captor. In the chair on the other side of the bed, Caitlyn's mother sat quietly crying, talking on her phone. Whitt understood Mrs McBeal had arrived a week earlier to put extra pressure on the investigative team.

'I can't believe it either,' she was saying. 'No. No. I just can't believe it. I tried to tell them. I tried to tell them all along.'

'Caitlyn, I'm Detective Inspector Edward Whittacker,' he said, shifting awkwardly between two men standing in the doorway, detectives or counsellors, family members, Whitt didn't know. 'I'm, uh, I'm part of the team who found you.'

'You're Detective Barnes's partner?' Caitlyn looked at him with tired eyes.

'Yes.'

'Come here.' She patted the bed beside her. Whitt moved around the bed, squeezing between people, and settled on the edge beside the girl. Her strength was incredible. As Whitt looked about the room, he noticed more than half the people here were crying. Though Caitlyn looked exhausted, a tiny fire seemed to be burning in her, brightening her eyes. She was being strong for the people here, her family and friends and those who had been searching for her. They needed to know she was alright.

'I know you've answered a lot of questions already,' Whitt said. 'But I just need to know anything you can tell me about your captor's connection to Sam Blue. Did the man who kept you ever say anything about Sam? Did he ever say his name?'

'He was very shocked and angry at his arrest,' Caitlyn said. 'We watched it on the television in the room together that first night. He said they weren't finished yet.'

'They weren't finished yet?' Whitt swallowed. His mouth was bone dry. 'Are you sure those were his exact words?'

Caitlyn reached over and held Whitt's hand. Her fingers were cool and hard, rough from long months in the concrete cell, slowly dying in the darkness.

'He said he needed him. See, he didn't touch me,' Caitlyn said. 'Not once. He didn't even speak to me. He was just holding me. He didn't know what to do. His partner, Sam, was gone and he didn't know

what to do without him.'

Whitt tried to breathe. His throat was tight.

'I saw Sam Blue a lot while I was locked up,' Caitlyn said. 'The TV was my only company. I'd see him walking to court. See footage of him giving evidence. I looked at his eyes. There was a deadness there. It was the same deadness that I saw in the eyes of the man who held me. It was like something inside him had shrivelled up and there was only emptiness left.'

Whitt felt a chill come over him.

'They killed those girls, Detective,' Caitlyn said. 'That man and Sam Blue. They're the same kind of monster.'

Chapter 78

THE SMOKING HUSK of Snale's four-wheel drive had been screened off from the public eye by a white tent. I saw the flashes of the Forensics officers' cameras as we pulled in to the driveway, their ghoulish silhouettes augmented by protective suits. All the front windows of Snale's house had blown out. Glass crunched under my feet as I made my way up the drive. Again the townspeople drove by slowly, pressing their faces against their car windows. Others gathered in huddles at a safe distance some metres down the road, to gawk and mutter, some still in their bedclothes.

There was a moustachioed officer talking to Snale as I walked into the house. The guy gave me an odd look as I entered. Snale turned away from him and threw her arms around me.

'Oh, Harry.' She squeezed me painfully, smoothed down the sides of my hair. I could see she had been crying. She examined me all over, the cast, my face, the torn remnants of the clothes I'd worn during the blast, still reeking of smoke. 'I can't believe you're here. They released you already?'

'The bomb,' I said, ignoring her mothering and turning to the Forensics officer. 'Any traces? Anything we can use?'

'Nothing biological,' he said. 'Everything burned to a crisp. Hot and fast, those gas-bottle jobs. Our main concern now is recovering everything we can of the boy for the parents.'

My stomach twisted. I must have made a face, because Snale reached up and continued patting my hair.

'Did you speak to them? Zac's parents?' I asked her. 'What did they say? Are they OK? We should get them into counselling. On suicide watch, maybe. They'll be fragile. They might –'

'Just give it a break for a while, Harriet,' she said. 'You look like the walking dead. You smell even worse. Have fifteen minutes off, and then we can get back to it.'

Chapter 79

I WALKED NUMBLY to the bathroom and stripped, pulling off a bunch of soft layers of skin from my forearms and neck. Looking in the mirror, half my face appeared badly sunburned, already peeling at my temple. I must have turned away at the last second, put my hands up to try to shield myself from the blast. The tender flesh on the underside of my forearms had taken the worst hit. The edges of my cast rubbed at the irritated skin, causing it to burn anew.

I held my arm up out of the stream of cool water and closed my eyes, raked back my singed hair. Against the back of my eyelids I could see the outline of Zac's mangled corpse in the front seat, the flames twisting around him, flaring out over the roof.

I screamed as something brushed against my leg. The pig had muscled his way into the bathroom and nosed open the shower door.

'Vicky! Vicky, help! Oh God!' I hollered, trying to shove the beast away. It weighed half a tonne. Snale rushed into the room, horrified, trying to shield her eyes from my naked form.

'Oh God, I'm sorry!' Despite everything, we were both almost laughing. 'He likes to drink the water. I think it's the soap. It tastes different. Oh Jesus, I'm so sorry. Jerry! Jerry! Come here, you idiot!'

The pig was snorting and snuffling at the few centimetres of water at the bottom of the shower. Eventually Snale gave up trying to haul the animal out of the shower with me. I got out and she handed me a towel.

'I'm seeing stuff on the news about Sam,' she said. 'The girl they found. Caitlyn? Someone got some footage of her being carried to an ambulance. She looked terrible.'

'Nothing about us out here?' I asked. 'The bombing? Zac?'

'No. No way. We're small fry.' She sat on the toilet seat near me.

I wrapped the towel around my body, felt exhausted.

'The girl,' Snale cleared her throat, 'she's saying –'

'I know what she's saying,' I said. 'It isn't true.'

Snale shifted uncomfortably.

'Would anything make you believe that it was?' she asked.

I took a comb from the edge of the sink and pulled it through my hair, looked at my own eyes in the mirror. Sam's eyes.

'No,' I answered.

Chapter 80

KASH WAS IN the living room, looking at the diary, the book pressed flat on the tabletop in front of him. On the left-hand page was a sketch of a body fitted out for a massacre, a faceless dummy strapped with guns and knives. It was a lot like the sketches Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris had made in their own diaries as they planned their assault. They'd envisioned body harnesses in which they could house handheld pipe bombs, holsters with easy access to knives for hand-to-hand combat should they run out of ammo. The diarist had copied excerpts from Eric's diary into their own.

*I must not be sidetracked by my feelings of sympathy, mercy.
I want to burn the world.*

In reality, the boys had become bored midway through their killing spree and hadn't used most of the weaponry they'd strapped to themselves. It was the same with Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech killer. He seemed to burn out his rage much faster than he went through his ammunition. It was all about build-up with these guys. Anticipation of the terror of their victims.

Maybe that was why the killer had left the note for Zac on the steering wheel, warning him that he was going to die. Otherwise, why not just let the thing activate itself the moment he shifted position? Why give him a chance? Why give him time to escape?

So he could think about it.

So he could know death was coming and be afraid.

'Yow!' Kash yelled, drew a finger to his lips.

'What?'

'I scraped it on the staple.' He sucked blood from the tiny cut, examined the injury in the light.

I went to the book, sat down next to him. Indeed, there were two staples in the centre of the notebook, holding the pages in place. The bottom fold of one staple was crooked, sticking up slightly, a trap that would catch a careless hand sweeping over it.

I pushed the fold of the staple down. It sprang back up.

Something rushed over me, an electric sensation that made all my injuries come alive at once, my muscles hardening. I snatched the book up and examined it in the light of the living room, tilted it to get the right angle.

'Oh my God,' I whispered. 'There's a page missing.'

Chapter 81

‘HOW DO YOU know that?’ Snale took the diary from me, examined it, squinting.

‘The staples are crooked. Someone’s bent them outwards to slide the middle page out of the notebook without tearing the paper. They’ve folded the staples back but they’re not completely flat.’ I took the book from her hands. ‘Look. Here. I can see the shape of a square indented in the next page. It isn’t on the previous page. The missing page has left indentations.’

Snale shifted away, her face taut with concentration. She began pulling open drawers and shuffling through them. She found a pencil and a blank sheet of paper and came back to the dining-room table. She flattened the book and began gently shading the pages with the side of the pencil.

‘Shouldn’t we wait for Forensics?’ Kash asked. ‘Get a carbon scan?’

‘We don’t have time,’ I said. ‘It could easily tell us what’s happening next. There was a reason it was removed so carefully.’ My heart was hammering. Watching Snale shading every millimetre of the paper was painful. She experimented, shading lighter and harder, trying to find the best pressure to reveal the pattern underneath. Lines, squares, arrows pointing and labels. A map was emerging before us. Two rows of blocks, some longer, some short, the same distance apart as they were wide.

‘It’s the main street,’ I said. ‘It’s Last Chance Valley.’

Chapter 82

WHITT SLAMMED THE piece of paper against the prison plexiglas and pointed at it.

‘Who the fuck is this?’

He wasn’t usually the type to curse, but his resolve had worn thin. Sitting with Caitlyn McBeal in a room full of people who had all but given up on the idea of ever seeing her again had pushed him over the edge. Whitt’s instinct was to bundle her up, feed her, care for her like a newborn babe.

Sam examined the paper Whitt was holding against the glass of the visitors’ centre, the EFIT image of the man who had almost killed Caitlyn. Sam glanced at Whitt, shrugged.

‘I have no idea.’

‘Enough bullshit.’ Whitt leaned forwards so that his nose was centimetres from the glass. ‘This is *the* guy. We’ve got him on CCTV purchasing the camera that was found in your apartment.’ He shuffled through his papers and extracted the image from the hock shop. ‘We’ve got Caitlyn saying he was desperately upset at your arrest. He’s around your age. Slim. Long arms. This guy could be your twin. Who the fuck is he?’

‘I don’t know!’ Sam pleaded. ‘I’ve been watching it all morning on the news. I’m telling you, I don’t know the guy! I have never seen him before in my life!’

Whitt let the paper slide from the glass, slumped back in his chair.

‘I don’t believe you,’ he sighed. ‘I can’t anymore. It’s not as though he would tell her you were partners for the benefit of framing you. He didn’t expect her to survive.’

‘He told her we were partners?’

‘In a roundabout way.’

Sam scratched at his neck then shook his head violently, like he was trying to clear water from his ears.

‘How did she survive?’ Sam asked.

‘She got away.’

‘Maybe he planned that.’

‘I doubt it. She killed a homeless man. She fought for her life to get out of that place. When Tox found her, she was crawling on the ground. The experts reckon she had mere days left.’

‘Look.’ Sam shifted closer to the glass. ‘I need you to keep believing in me or I’ll never get out of here.’

‘If you want to get out of here, you better keep looking at this damned picture and figure out who the hell he is.’ Whitt left the image resting face-up on the counter. He said nothing as he headed past the security guards and into the hall.

Whitt hated to admit it, but he was beginning to wonder if Sam Blue was exactly where he belonged.

Chapter 83

IT WAS A massacre plan. As the missing page emerged, my heart sank lower and lower. Before, when the diary had been mainly praise for spree killers, research into bombs and weaponry, I could underestimate the diarist's plans for the people of Last Chance Valley. But I could see now this killer planned to make sure no one survived.

The buildings of the main street made two identical columns down the centre of the page, on the right the post office, a hardware store, a tiny cafe and a supermarket, among others. On the left, across the street from the post office, lay Snale's tiny police station, a single-storey square with a single interrogation room, a single cell, desk space for two and the armoury. Next came the pub with its rear car park, a farming supply store and a mechanic's, also with a wide asphalt parking lot.

Four main buildings, shoulder to shoulder, forming two identical blocks.

Around the buildings, the diarist had marked a dotted line, the path of his plan.

Step one: Kill Officer Snale in police station. Acquire weapons.

Step two: Plant device #1 in the car park behind pub. Set timer.

Step three: Take the semitrailer from the mechanic car park and use it to block off bottom of the main street, creating a U-shape to trap victims.

Step five: Plant devices #2 and #3 in semitrailer. Set timers.

Step four: Get John Destro and secure upper balcony of the post office.

Kash, Snale and I looked over the faint map, following the steps.

'This is terrifying,' Snale murmured. A thin sheen of sweat glistened at her hairline.

'You're the tactics guy,' I told Kash. 'What do you think?'

A brief smile flashed over his features. A truce between us, his mass-casualty expertise finally coming into play.

'It's a single-man operation,' he said. 'All the steps are sequential. There's nothing here to indicate that there are two people acting simultaneously. Whoever he is, he's pretty confident. Step one – taking out you, Vicky, as you man the police station. That's no mean feat. I don't imagine he's just going to waltz in there and you're going to hand him the keys to the armoury.'

'Unless he's already got a gun,' Snale said. 'And he's just going to surprise me and upgrade from whatever he has to one of the

semiautomatics.'

There was a moment of tense silence. Kash put a finger on the paper and traced the dotted line.

'He then goes and plants what I can only imagine is one of his bombs in the car park behind the pub. He takes a semitrailer and uses that to block off the street, effectively making a trap. This first bomb must be to drive everyone out of the pub, into the street. The truck explodes, blocking off an escape that way. Everyone is herded into this space.' He pointed to the centre of the map, the U-shape made by the buildings and the burning truck. 'They're rounded up like cattle. The road up past the post office is the only way out. And from the balcony, with a semiautomatic, he's ready to pick them off one by one as they run for their lives.'

'It's ...' Snale was lost for words. She pursed her lips.

'It's very sophisticated,' Kash finished for her, looking over the page. 'It uses crowd-herding tactics to maximise the death toll. He'd have learned that from the spree killers he's studied. Anticipate where the victims will cluster naturally. Predict their movements when they panic, and channel them into the line of fire by securing the exits. It's interesting, though, that he doesn't channel the survivors of the initial blasts into a final explosion. He wants to shoot them down one at a time.'

'It's the same reason he left the note on the steering wheel,' I said. 'The same reason he was pacing at the site of Theo Campbell's death. He wants to give them time to think about what's happening to them. Time to ...' I shrugged. 'I don't know. To feel ...'

'Sorry,' Kash said.

'Sorry for what?' Snale said.

I flipped through the diary. The only thing I could think that united all the spree killers in the diary was their rage. Their desire to be punishers.

I didn't want to die, but I would have no choice. Vengeance is the only path.

I will get you all back.

You could have stopped this.

'You were right, Harry,' Kash said. 'You were right from the start. It's not terrorism. He's not trying to make a political statement. To get people to act. This is pure vengeance. He wants the people of Last Chance Valley to feel sorry for whatever it is they've done to cause this.'

'What *have* we done?' Snale asked. There were tears in her eyes now. She sighed helplessly. I watched her leave the table for the bathroom, swiping at her cheeks.

I turned back to the map. 'The plan really seems to be all about maximising casualties,' I said. 'So we can assume it'll go off when the most people possible are at the local pub, if the killer hasn't abandoned his plan.'

'I don't see why he would have,' Kash said. 'He knows we have the diary. But he doesn't know we have the plan page. He has no reason to suspect that the plan has been compromised.'

'So when are most people down at the pub?'

'Most of the town is there every Saturday night,' Snale said from the doorway.

We all looked at the calendar on the wall. We had two days to stop a massacre.

Chapter 84

WE CALLED DEZ and asked him to get the word out that people weren't to congregate in the town. Snale left us for Zac Taby's parents' house with a pair of counsellors who had flown in from White Cliffs.

I sat in the passenger seat of Kash's car and deleted the many text messages from journalists on my phone, some about Last Chance Valley's deaths, more about Sam. I looked up the EFIT image of the man Caitlyn McBeal was telling the world was my brother's accomplice. I didn't know him. I wanted, so desperately, to feel some spark of recognition. I ran my eyes over his long, straight nose and dark eyes, over the shape of his shaved head. Like most EFIT images, I knew this would be a cleaner, slightly dimmed version of the real man. But there was no trigger in my brain. Not even the softest soundings of alarm.

I looked at the time. In four minutes, Sam would have access to the prison phones. Kash was walking towards the car. I had my finger poised over the answer button.

'My brother's going to call me in a minute.'

'Oh. Do you want -'

'No, it's fine. Let's get rolling.'

The phone rang. Kash shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he started the car.

'Hi, Sammy,' I said.

'This is a reverse charge call from Silverwater Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre, a division of Silverwater Correctional Complex. If you wish to accept the call, press one.'

'Urgh. I always forget about the automated message,' I sighed. Kash gave an awkward smile.

'Harry?' It was Sam.

'Hi.' I could feel myself smiling, despite the heaviness in my heart. 'Are you OK?'

'I'm a bit numb, to be honest,' he said. 'When they said they had a picture of the guy I was so ready for it to be someone I knew. I mean, it would have to be, right? I was ready to be in an absolute rage. But this guy - I don't know him. Do you?'

'No,' I said. 'Never seen him before in my life.'

'This is unbelievable.' Sam sounded scared. I sounded scared, too. My voice was coming back to me, half a second later, the recording device used by the prison echoing as it taped us. 'Maybe if they catch

him, it can all come to an end.'

'Whitt and Tox are on it,' I said. 'I'm going to wrap up here, and then I'll be right there with them.'

'I'd rather you weren't,' he said. 'Harry, he got into my apartment. He can get into yours. What he did to those women. He's an animal. He's smart and he's vicious.'

'I'm pretty vicious myself, you know.'

Kash smiled beside me as he drove.

'I know you are, but I just don't need anything else to worry about. If I know you're out there in the desert I can at least pretend you're safe.'

Sam was always like that when we were kids. Protective. Worrisome. When we were placed in different homes he would sometimes run away from his placement to find me, even if he had to catch the train from one side of the state to the other. Just to see me in person with his own eyes and confirm I was alright. I felt a powerful yearning to be home with him, to be on the hunt for the man in the picture.

I told Sam we were going to catch this guy. One way or another. I'd spend every dollar I had. I would give up my job, my life, my freedom, if that was what it took.

I sent a text message to Tox Barnes, the beginnings of an idea tingling in the back of my mind.

Something to try, I typed. *Maybe go round my apartment and turn the lights or TV on. If he broke into Sam's place, maybe he'll break into mine. Worth a shot.*

Tox didn't answer. He rarely did. But I knew he would know it was a good trap to set. Whoever this man was, he was obsessed with my brother. Now that Sam was off limits, maybe I could lure him over to me.

Chapter 85

KASH HAD WOKEN me from a thin sleep at sunrise by nudging the edge of my bed with his heavy boot. I'd heard him huffing around at 3 am and it seemed he hadn't showered. He smelled of sweat.

'It's all a set-up,' he said.

'I'm going to need coffee if you're going to be vague,' I said. A shimmer of hope went through me that he was talking about Sam's case, but he was holding a laptop, and when he sat down beside me I saw it was full of Qantas ticketing information.

'Jace Robit's crew are making a run for it.' Kash pointed to the screen. 'An ASIO buddy sent me these after I put in for security checks on Robit and his three mates. In the last six months, all four of them have applied for passports. They've each booked a one-way ticket to Ngurah Rai Airport in Denpasar. All leaving on the same day.'

'When?'

'Next week.'

'They could be going on a bucks' weekend.' I rubbed my eyes.

'John Stieg,' Kash brought up a mugshot of Jace's short, thick-bodied friend, 'he's closed all his online gaming accounts and cashed in the remaining credit. Frank Scullen's divided his bank accounts with his wife in half and taken his share out in cash. Damien Ponch sold his truck.'

'A *big* bucks' weekend.'

'One-way tickets, Blue.' Kash nudged me. 'Focus. I think this whole thing has been a misdirect. An exit strategy. They're not on the offensive. They're trying to hold us off, ensure we only react to the wrong circumstances.'

'I don't understand.'

'Get your things.' He got up and kicked my bag towards me. 'I'll explain on the way. Last Chance might be in more danger than we thought.'

Chapter 86

KASH HAD THE binoculars trained on Jace Robit's house and was slowly adjusting the focus, the dial making a soft clicking as he rolled it with his fingers. The agent had plenty of high-tech equipment in his truck. Beyond the windshield, affixed to the hood of the car, a parabolic microphone was pointed towards the house on the plain. Now and then it picked up voices from inside, the clunking and shuffling of objects.

Robit's three friends were inside with him: Frank Scullen, John Stieg and Damien Ponch. When the heat is on, criminals tend to band together, which isn't clever behaviour. Drug dealers call more frequent meetings. Bank robbers organise a late-night rendezvous. Young partygoers who got out of control one weekend and assaulted a girl all come together for a crisis talk to get their stories straight. Kash was muttering reconnaissance to himself like he couldn't help it, marking out distances and wind direction.

'Four confirmed in the interior,' he murmured. 'None visible on the exterior.'

'Yo, General Patton.' I slapped his chest. 'Tell me what's going on.'

'Here's my theory. The gold we found at Chief Campbell's place belonged to these guys,' Kash said.

'What makes you suspect that?'

'Think about it. Chief Campbell's got eighty K worth of gold stashed in his house, and his wife doesn't know about it. It's not recorded as evidence at the police station. The very first people Olivia Campbell pointed to as suspects were these guys. She sensed they were a threat to her husband. She asked him what he was up to, and he said it was a drug sting. Well, we know that's not true. There's nothing in the police log about a sting operation. Snale knew nothing about it.'

'OK, I'm with you.'

'I think these guys acquired that gold from somewhere illegally,' Kash said. 'I think Theo Campbell found them with it, and he took it off their hands. We know from what Bella Destro said that Chief Campbell didn't always play by the rules. He might have stopped them on the road. Or maybe they were acting weird and he was snooping around them for drugs. I don't know. But somehow he discovered them with it, and decided he'd just take it.'

'Hmm.' I nodded along.

'Now the guys have got a problem. They need to get rid of Theo

Campbell. But there are seventy-five people in the town and they're no angels. They're likely to be the first suspects. How do they get rid of Campbell *and* control the circumstances around the investigation?'

'Control the circumstances?'

'I'm talking war tactics.' He shook his head. 'I'm sorry. In hostile situations, you strategise to control how your enemy thinks and reacts, bait them, feed them false information.'

'They constructed the diary,' I said. 'Used it as bait to make sure we'd connect it with the bombing on the hill. They provided us with the answers before we asked any questions. We went looking for an angry teen.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'We've been totally distracted, looking for vengeful young spree killers in training. Lone-wolf terrorists. They put Zac Taby right under our noses.'

'So why kill him? He was a great suspect.'

'Maybe they weren't after Taby.' He shrugged. 'Any of us could have got in that car. Maybe they weren't planning on any of us *actually* getting in. Zac got into the car at night. It was dark. In the daytime, someone would have looked in and seen those gas bottles in the back seat. It's possible they were just trying to scare us. Make us evacuate the town.'

'Eighty thousand dollars is a lot of money,' I said. 'But it's not much shared between four men. And if the whole goal was the get their rocks back, why didn't they take them?'

'Maybe what we found at Campbell's house is just the tip of the iceberg,' Kash said. 'Maybe there's so much gold they could all start new lives on it. And Theo Campbell was threatening to bring all their grand plans crashing down.'

I stared at the house before us. A little fibro shack in the middle of a hole in the middle of nowhere. I could imagine the temptation presented to people like these, scraping out a living from the hard earth. Zac Taby had wanted to run away. Did these men hear the same call of the horizon?

'Remember how the gold was packed?' Kash said. 'Wrapped in black plastic. Bound with duct tape. Why wrap it like that? Because you want to store it, disguise it, and ship it.'

I sat up and grabbed the criminal record sheets we'd printed out that morning for the crew inside the house.

Jace Robit. Domestic assault. Robbery. Possession of a prohibited substance.

Frank Scullen, assault, grievous bodily harm, theft.

John Stieg and Damien Ponch both had records for fraud. There were also domestic assaults, the complainants their wives.

Kash was right. These men were not the town's most upstanding

citizens. They had every reason to want to get away from this life, and the willingness to do it in an underhanded way.

‘So what are they going to do?’ I said. ‘They’ve already killed two people. They think we’re well down the wrong track in the investigation. Are they just going to leave quietly?’

‘I don’t know,’ Kash said. ‘It worries me that they removed the massacre plan page. Maybe they just thought it was too much. But maybe they ...’

He sighed, his voice uneven.

‘Maybe they’ll try to go out with a blast,’ he continued. ‘A smoke screen. Slip away in the chaos.’

The microphone crackled.

‘I sure as fuck hope so!’ someone shouted. ‘I hope he suffered big-time, the little ... I tell you what, this place would be better off with a quarter ... its inhabitants. Seventy-five was far too ... many. Seventy-three now. We’re getting closer to perfect.’

The microphone crackled and went silent. I thumped the speaker sitting on the console between us.

‘This thing is rubbish,’ I said. ‘We need to get closer.’

‘I’ve already conducted a risk assessment,’ Kash said. ‘This is our most effective reconnaissance base. We can do another assessment in forty-seven minutes, if the wind changes, maybe.’

I listened quietly to Kash’s reasoning, then opened the car door and got out. Kash was behind me by the time I got to the edge of the property, crouching in the bracken.

A handful of locusts, disturbed by my presence, fluttered up and around me. The sun was immediately blazing on my already burned face. I shielded myself against it and crept to the wire fence, to a collection of rusty steel drums.

‘Don’t get us killed, Harry,’ Kash murmured as he crept up behind me. ‘This is Jace’s property. If he shoots us he’ll have three witnesses to tell the cops it was self-defence.’

‘What if I kill them?’ I said. ‘What are you gonna say?’

He rolled his eyes at me, shifted forwards and signalled for me to wait. His combat tactics would get us up beside the house without being seen. I held on to the back of his belt, waited, sweating, for him to move.

He pointed forwards and we rushed into the field towards the house.

Chapter 87

THE GRASS WAS waist high. I huffed with exertion just keeping up with my partner. Though my injuries from the explosion had been mild, it taken a lot out of me. We flitted across the field and stopped short beneath a window. Kash checked under the house and then flattened on the ground and started crawling underneath on his belly. It was hard to commando-crawl with a broken arm. I dragged myself forwards with him, sweat sticking the dust to my cheeks.

The floorboards creaked a metre above our heads. I twisted onto my side and lay in the dirt, watching my partner's face, his glasses fogging with condensation.

'It's not going to be a problem for much longer,' someone said. 'We get whatever the hell we can over the next couple of days, and then we go.'

'Your wife's going to be the one that'll give us trouble, Johnno,' someone else said. 'Does she have any idea what we're doin'?'

'Nah, mate. No way. She doesn't have a clue. If any of youse touch her, mate, I'll fuckin' stab ya.'

'Do as he says,' someone said. It sounded like Jace. 'Leave her alone. We don't want anyone drawing attention to us until we can get everything into place. After it's done we'll be outta here.'

Kash and I stared at the dirt between us, listening to the micro-sounds as they came through the boards. Someone flipping the cap off a bottle of beer, the hiss of the compressed air escaping. Someone was standing right over us, causing dust to trickle down into our hair.

'I know this probably sounds weird,' a voice said. 'But do youse ever, I dunno. Have you ever thought about maybe stayin' once it's over?'

'Stayin'? *Here*? Mate, are you nuts? This place is a fuckin' shithole. We're talkin' about changin' *everything*'. Why the fuck would you want to stay?'

'I guess I feel like I would kinda miss my kids, you know.'

There was silence. The men moved around, open and closed doors. There was a horse race playing on a television or radio somewhere. At least two of them fell to cheering the horses on. Groans of joy or sorrow, I couldn't tell, as the race ended.

'What time do you want to go out there tonight, then?' someone said.

Jace Robit replied. 'Usual time. Get out there at eight.'

Kash and I looked at each other. I saw movement out on the road and twisted slightly, squinted in the light.

‘Oh, shit.’

‘What?’

‘Digger. The town dog. Look.’

Out on the road, the plump grey mutt was trotting along on its own, tongue wagging limply between its jaws. No clue where it was going, no sign of where it had come from. I knew that if there was one thing that dogs got excited about, other than food, it was humans lying on the ground. If the dog saw us, our risk assessment score would be through the roof.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

‘Oh God, don’t let it look over here,’ I breathed. I heard the floorboards above me creak. ‘Don’t move. Don’t look at it. Maybe it won’t see us.’

As is typical with my luck, I chanced a look at the road just as Digger was glancing over into the shadows beneath the house. The dog stopped short, lifted her head, sniffed the air. I fancied I saw her smile as she began to bound towards us.

‘Shit!’ Kash seethed. He sprang to his hands and knees, unsure of what to do. ‘Fucking thing!’

The dog was running at us, barking with joy. I heard the men in the house above us shifting, moving to the front of the house, following the commotion.

Chapter 88

‘GO,’ I TOLD Kash. ‘Get to cover. I’ll distract it.’

Kash scampered to the back of the house, around the brick foundations, and disappeared between the long grass. Digger slammed into me, a flurry of licking and happy barks.

‘What is that thing doing?’ I heard Jace sneer from above me. ‘Fucking dog.’

I clamped my hands around the dog’s muzzle. She gave a happy growl, tried to play-bite the cast on my arm.

‘What’s it got?’ someone asked from the couch. ‘A roo?’

‘Dunno. I’ll go have a look.’

I crawled around the foundations, looking for somewhere to hide. If Jace Robit found me down here, he’d know I’d heard their plans to ‘change everything’, to abandon their kids and wives. A group of men fleeing after a dramatic act, whatever it might be. If he found me now ... I gripped the bricks, tried to contain the rising panic.

I looked up. There was a narrow gap between the brick-work and one of the wooden beams that crossed the bottom of the house. Just wide enough to snuggle in to, just deep enough to hide in. I didn’t know if I was strong enough to crawl up into it, to hold myself wedged in the space. But I had to try. I gathered a handful of the dry, powdery dirt from beneath me.

‘Sorry, dog,’ I whispered. I flung the dirt in the dog’s eyes. The animal yelped, twisted sideways. I put my feet into the gap beside the bricks and pulled myself upwards.

Digger was blinded and ran out from beneath the house, trying to scrape at its eyes with its paws. Already my broken arm, braced against the wooden beam, was screaming with pain. I closed my eyes and held my stomach in, thought about stone, concrete, solid things. I was a part of the house. I was invisible. I heard Jace Robit walking down the porch stairs mere metres from me.

Something was crawling along my side. Something big. I hoped it was a locust. At least a huntsman spider, those big, hairy but harmless creatures. I prayed silently that it wasn’t a red-back. Its needle-like legs were creeping slowly up my armpit, over the top of my shoulder.

‘What’s wrong with ya? Ya stupid mongrel.’ Robit’s feet appeared beside the dog. He crouched and I tucked my head up against the floorboards. My legs were starting to shake. I shifted my weight from one to the other, pushing hard against the walls of my little hidey-hole

with my arms. I could hear the man breathing, feel his gaze wandering over the dirt beneath me. Sweat was rolling down my ribs, collecting in the front of my shirt. The crawling thing walked across my ear and over my temple. I squeezed my eyes shut as it wandered over the bridge of my nose. The urge to scream was all-consuming. Exhale. Scream. Relax. Fall. *Give up, Harry. You can't do this.*

I heard Jace's leather boots creak as he stood.

'Get moving, idiot.' He kicked the dog until it began to trot away. Jace sniffed and spat as he climbed the stairs back up to the house.

I collapsed onto the ground with a thud and peeled the spider from my hair, flicking it away. An enormous red-back. It rolled in the dust, oil-black legs wiggling, righted itself and crept away.

Chapter 89

WHITT STOOD BY the table at the very back of the police briefing room as the officers assembled in the chairs around him. Tox stood beside him, slowly devouring a Mint Slice biscuit, examining the treat closely between bites. It took all of Whitt's resolve not to knock it out of his hand. His nerves were frazzled, and crumbs were falling all over the floor. Whitt needed control, perfection, now more than ever.

He'd learned little more about Tox's deadly reputation, the murders he was supposed to have committed as a child. The man's records were sealed, and rumours of the event varied wildly. It seemed far more fashionable to simply join the masses and hate Tate 'Toxic' Barnes than it was to be certain of the facts. Whitt was certain he didn't hate Tox. But he was far too nervous to like him, either.

'Alright, listen up,' Chief Morris said. The squat old man commanded the attention of the room. Young officers who had been laughing and chatting turned around in their seats. 'We'll make this short so you can get back out on the road. We're getting a lot of calls from members of the public who have seen men fitting the EFIT description of McBeal's abductor. You're doing a good job attending to them. We're hoping to hone the search now with some new information we've just received.'

Tox seemed to get part of his biscuit stuck in his throat. He thumped his chest with his fist. Whitt winced.

'Forensics have done a sweep of the Pinkerton Hotel. Even though we've restricted the analysis to the underground basement where Caitlyn was kept, there are still hundreds and hundreds of prints, and we can't tell which ones are relevant. It's taking time to narrow them down. We've been fast-tracking the prints through the national database and some interesting characters have started turning up. We've shown their pictures to Caitlyn, but she hasn't identified anyone. It's likely some of these guys might have changed their appearance since they were last in contact with police. Some of the photographs are very old.'

Six images sprang onto the screen. All white men with the dazed, tired look of inmates appearing for mugshots, their mouths downturned and eyes distant. Three were bearded. One wore thick-framed red glasses, smiling with missing front teeth.

'Take a good look,' Chief Morris said. 'Some of these guys are off the grid. Long-term addicts, ex-cons. This one, Regan Banks, has a murder

charge from fifteen years ago. This one, Malcolm Donovan, does too. All the others have served time. Robberies, assaults, that sort of thing. But one of them might be our guy. You're going to split into teams and each track one of these guys down, bring them in for questioning.'

Chief Morris pushed a button on a nearby laptop and another screen full of dead-eyed men appeared. Someone was walking through the tables handing out printed copies of the faces.

'We need to nab this guy before he does any more damage. This isn't over, people,' Chief Morris said. 'Not by a long shot.'

'I'm gonna split off,' Tox said through the remnants of a second biscuit. 'Gotta go check on Harry's place. You wanna come?'

'No, I'm going to stay here.' Whitt rubbed his face, pushed his fingers into his eye sockets and massaged the muscles there. It had been twenty-four solid hours since they found Caitlyn McBeal. Thirty-six or so since he had slept. They had been out most of the day driving around, following operational calls, running in and out of buildings looking for men with shaved heads. His temples were throbbing. 'I'm going to put my head down in the coffee room so I can be here if they get a call.'

'Right.' Tox gave Whitt a slap on the arm and yanked his flak jacket off. He dropped it on the tabletop beside his partner. 'I'll be back later.'

Whitt watched his partner go without knowing that he wouldn't be back at all.

Chapter 90

IT WASN'T OVER for Regan.

He stood by the windows of the discount electronics store and watched the pictures flashing on the huge flat screens, ran a hand over his shaven skull. Twelve men the police wanted to speak to in relation to the abduction of Caitlyn McBeal, and possibly the Georges River killings. In the top right-hand corner of the screen, he saw his own face. Regan was sunken-cheeked and scruffy-haired in the picture, wearing the beard he'd grown in remand to try to make himself look fiercer than he really was. A wide-eyed teen being photographed for intake at Long Bay Correctional. He remembered the corrections officers taking the shot, fifteen years earlier, how terrified he'd been. He'd been able to hear the catcalls down the hall from where he stood. The men, waiting for him.

It had been an apprenticeship in pain. Years learning how to take it, how to experience pain in so many unique and creative ways. When they'd come for him on his last days, Regan had looked at the man in the mirror on the wall of his cell. A master of suffering.

As he'd left the cell block that had been his home, Regan had felt his muscles tightening, hardening. He'd walked through the administration block to collect his belongings and felt his fingers lengthen to talons. Through the transition cages, he'd felt black wings unfurling from his shoulderblades. In the car park where they left him, free to go wherever he pleased, his eyes had begun to burn with bloody, furious tears.

Regan realised that all along, he'd been designed to evolve into the thing he was now, this monster. His time in prison had been a natural steeling process. An incubation period. A thing as hard as him needed to be forged. All goodness needed to be squeezed from it. Empathy. Passion. Weakness. Standing there in the parking lot in the dark, the distant sounds of the waves crashing against the cliffs beyond the prison, he closed his eyes and remembered Sam Blue. All the time he'd been locked away, Regan hadn't dared call his friend's face to his mind. He'd been afraid of the fury that would come. The bloody memories. He remembered Sam, and knew only that he needed to find him.

Regan stood looking at his own face on the television screen now. Inevitably, the news story shifted and there he was. Beautiful Sam, with his downcast eyes and hollow cheeks.

Regan put a hand on the window and bent low, focused on the tiny pixels that made up the man's face.

Sam. His soulmate.

Chapter 91

KASH AND I drove back down the main street after our surveillance on the Robit property. There were patrol officers in the town, borrowed from towns all around, talking to people at their fences. Mick the bartender was leaving his house with an armful of towels, watching us roll by, his big belly making a single circle of sweat on his T-shirt where the flesh dipped inwards at his navel.

I pulled Kash's arm, gesturing for him to stop. From the street outside the little house across from Victoria Snale's property, I could hear children playing inside. As I went to the door, the young mother I'd seen the night Zac Taby lost his life shouted from somewhere towards the rear of the building.

I knocked and two young ones, maybe three and four years old, ran to the screen door and stared expectantly up at me. I'd seen these golden-haired children that night in their pyjamas. The mother was tired when she came to the door, uncomposed, expecting someone else. She remembered me.

'I'm Harriet Blue,' I said. 'This is my partner, Elliot Kash.' She opened the door. The kids tumbled out, seemingly very impressed with Kash, a thickly muscled superhero towering above them. There was no sign of a dad here.

'Mary Skinner,' the mother said, smiling. 'You two, get back in here.'

The kids giggled and ran into the cool, dark hall. I followed Mary past a wall of framed photographs, backpacks hanging on hooks, a wooden rack inadequately small for the dozens of dusty shoes piled onto it. We went to the kitchen and she didn't offer us coffee. She was uncomfortable. Picking at fingernails split from nibbling.

'You probably know why I'm here,' I said.

'The bombings.' She glanced towards the door as something crashed in one of the bedrooms. 'It's terrifying. Have you got a suspect yet?'

'We've got some leads,' I said. 'But I think maybe you could lengthen them for me. I don't know if you remember what you said to me two nights ago when I was out there on your porch.'

Mary had tucked one arm into her ribs, the other tight against her chest. She opened the fridge to give herself somewhere to look.

'I don't remember anything much except the blast,' she said. 'I was watching out the window when it happened. I saw you fall. Are you OK? I mean,' – she examined my broken arm – 'nothing permanent?'

‘I’m fine,’ I said. ‘You told me that it was “all gonna come out”. You said, “It’s all coming to an end.”’

Mary looked horrified. Kash was sitting on a stool by the kitchen bench quite near her, measuring the response on her face. She took a bottle of water from the fridge and set it on the counter, turned away from us both.

‘I didn’t say that,’ she said quietly.

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Look, I’m alone here.’ She threw me a hard look, on the edge of snapping. ‘I lost a child. I lost a husband. I say weird things sometimes that I don’t necessarily mean.’

The silence that fell was heavy. I could hear the children whispering beyond the door. I looked at them and they squealed and ran away.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘My husband left. He’s up north. Cairns.’

‘I mean to your child,’ I said. ‘You said you –’

‘Brandon overdosed.’ Mary’s gaze was locked on me. ‘It was an accident. He and his friends had been messing around with stuff brought in by the truckers. He was seventeen, child of my first marriage.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘I don’t have anything else for you.’ Mary shut the fridge door hard, made jars rattle inside it. ‘That’s it. Now, I’ve got things to do here.’

She let us walk ourselves out. The sun seemed somehow closer, more foreboding. I felt I’d disturbed something, shifted a rock off an insect I didn’t recognise, something dangerous. Something better left alone.

Chapter 92

ALL HIS LIFE, Regan had enjoyed ruining beautiful things. It was a strange sort of instinct, an impulse, the same kind of impulse that drove people to fix pictures hanging crookedly on walls or scrub single greasy fingerprints off of otherwise blessedly clean windowpanes. When new toys came into the youth care facility playroom, he'd break them. Shiny and glossy and smelling of plastic, with their bubbly eyes and stupidly grinning mouths, they seemed painfully perfect. He'd pull out a teddy's eye. Snap off a robot's arm. Cut a doll's hair so that it stuck out of the bulbous rubber scalp in ugly tufts. The broken, dirtied things gave him joy. Maybe he felt they were more like him when they were torn and crooked. He was only small. He couldn't know.

Then he turned his attention to the other boys and girls. It had begun with pretty little Claudia, with her big eyes and golden curls. Claudia would be adopted in a snap. The carers were already talking about it. She was a doll, they said. Regan had snuck in to the kitchen and found a packet of matches. She wasn't so perfect when he was done with her.

Regan became 'difficult'. The word was mentioned around him in a lot of different ways between foster families and care workers. He listened to them chattering above him like he wasn't there. There had been 'difficulties' at his last home. He was 'difficult' to place because of his 'difficult' behaviour. There were other words. Oppositional. Aggressive. Introverted.

Regan was sixteen when he met Sam. He'd been standing by the cake table at one of those pathetic Christmas events the Department of Children's Services ran every year at the town hall. Sam had been a lanky, pale kid, his limp black hair constantly hanging in his eyes. He was the only other teen at the stupid party. Regan had watched him for a long while, bored, until he saw Sam observing the gorgeous Christmas cake someone had baked for the occasion. Perfect edges. Immaculate red and green icing. Sam had reached out when no one was looking and pushed one of the lollies on the top of the cake until it sank into the soft, spongy interior, leaving a gaping hole in the design. Regan had smiled. Sam had seen it.

Regan had found him. His perfect match.

But as always, it wasn't long before that perfection was ruined. Soon there would be blood, and screaming. The adult Regan remembered now as he walked down the empty, dark street, his head low, the

baseball cap pulled down over his eyes. Everything was so messy now. So dark, so torn. A beautiful and terrifying time, the very streets seemed awash with new life. Regan came around a corner and a group of young women swirled and ebbed around him. Perfume. He felt the muscles of his shoulders knot, the bones grinding in his neck. Marissa. Elle. Rosetta. His girls. His sacrifices to Sam. The women on the street passed him, a glittering flock of birds. There wasn't time for that now. That part of his life was over.

Regan glanced now and then at the paper in his hand, the numbers on the buildings around him. He reached the pale blue building and looked up to the third-floor windows facing the distant water.

The lights in Harriet Blue's apartment were on.

Chapter 93

PEOPLE THINK THAT in the Australian desert there's nowhere to hide. That it makes the perfect hunting ground because for hundreds of kilometres there is no cover. Barren sand oceans, dotted here and there with clumps of thin, dead or dying trees. In truth the desert is full of holes. From where I stood with Kash, Last Chance Valley was almost invisible in the distance, but for a small rise where the rocky rim poked through the horizon. I knew that beyond where we stood, there would be cracks and crevices in the desert, some kilometres deep, reaching far enough down into the earth for a person to disappear into. It's a treacherous place. A place not to be wandered into on moonless nights. It does make the perfect hunting ground, but not for its barrenness. It's porous. Full of secrets.

It was here in the depths of the desert that we met the Forensics team. We had spent the day on the ridge, watching Jace Robit's property.

Two men from the team who had dealt with the burned car at Snale's house drove up to our spot in the desert now in a dusty four-wheel drive. The moustached one who had looked at me so strangely in Snale's hallway.

'I'm Glen. This is Wayne.' He shook Kash's hand, ignored me. 'We just finished up with the vehicle. It's all here.' He handed Kash a report.

'I might need you guys to stick around in the town, just be an extra hand if we need it. Something's happening tonight at eight,' Kash explained to them. 'We've got some interesting suspects moving about. Harry and I will be on this group, and we'll get Snale and some other officers on the town.'

Glen gave me another nasty look. I jutted my chin at him, a challenge.

'What's your problem, mate?'

'Nothin',' he said, shrugging.

'Come on. Out with it.'

He sighed, gave his offsider a look. 'I know who you are. I was there at your brother's apartment when they went in after the arrest.'

There was a meaningful silence among the men around me. I felt a weight steadily increasing on my shoulders.

'Yeah?' I said. 'What's your point?'

'My point is that I saw the evidence, Detective Blue. The duct tape

on the bed. The messy sheets. The video camera. It was sick. I have nightmares about what happened in that apartment. I find it mildly infuriating that you've stuck by your brother all this time, that's all.'

'*Nothing* happened in that apartment,' I said.

'Maybe we should just –' Kash said.

'What's your explanation, then?' Glen said. 'I've heard you say your brother is being framed. You must believe he was framed by this guy the police are hunting right now, the shaven-headed guy, the one who abducted Caitlyn McBeal. The guy who *told her* he was Sam's partner. So, what, this guy abducts these girls right from under your brother's nose and savagely murders them and dumps them like pieces of trash. He waits until Sam goes to work and he says, "Ha ha! Now's my chance to do it again!" He abducts Caitlyn, and he's all ready to do his nasty business on her, when "Oh, hot damn!" Sam's been arrested! Shit! Holy moly! This wasn't in the script!'

'Mate,' – Kash stepped forwards, put a hand out – 'just back down.'

'So the guy thinks, *Shit, I'd better high-tail it over to Sam's place and plant that evidence I was going to plant before the police raid the place!*' Glen was waving his hands theatrically now. He waited for me to give him some kind of answer. But no words would come.

'Isn't it more likely,' Glen said, 'that Sam was going to go home that night and this man with the shaved head was going to be there, and they were going to kill Caitlyn McBeal together? You're violent, Detective. Everybody knows that. Isn't it more likely that your brother is violent, too, than the gentle, misunderstood innocent man you say he is? Let's be real!'

There was an old and familiar Harry who would have stepped forwards and uppercut the man before me. A swift and hard skyward thrust. But when I called on her, I found her too tired to wake.

I turned and walked towards the car, heard Kash calling after me as I got in. This time, I didn't have the strength to fight, to face my troubles. I ran.

Chapter 94

LET'S BE REAL!

I drove through the desert, being real.

Yes, my brother had confessed to the murders of three beautiful young women who studied at the same university he worked at three days a week. They'd disappeared, as Glen the Forensics asshole had said, from right under my brother's nose. It was 'likely' these things had happened because my brother had killed them.

Yes, an awful collection of violent sexual pornography was found in my brother's apartment. It was 'likely' this was because Sam himself had acquired that material. Because he liked it. Because he'd used it to fuel his fantasies. Because he was a killer.

Yes, it was 'likely' that whoever the man with the shaved head was, he'd told Caitlyn McBeal that he was my brother's partner because he was, indeed, my brother's partner.

Yes, it was 'likely' that Sam was violent, because I was violent.

That he had a dark edge, a beast inside, that he could not control. A vicious internal guard dog, identical to the one that had started growing inside me almost from the moment I was born. It was a hellhound, a ferocious thing that I unleashed whenever I needed to. I'd let him free as a child when foster fathers and older brothers crept into my bedroom at night. When kids at new schools ragged on me. When the men I hunted in my job got away with what they'd done to their victims, and someone had to pick up the slack.

My dog was dangerous. It leapt out before I could stop it. Sometimes I could wrangle it back. But the beast had done such a good job over the years protecting me, it was too strong and wild now for me to ever hope to tame.

Did Sam have a beast inside? Had it gone feral on him? Got a taste for blood it couldn't sate?

No. I would never believe that. Could never, ever believe that. Because if it could happen to him, it could happen to me.

Chapter 95

AGAIN I CAME upon Jed Chatt's house without meaning to, and I pulled in to the driveway with horror, realising I'd probably been under the gaze of his rifle for the last kilometre without thinking about it. The crosshairs trained on my face. I wiped at my cheeks and found tears. This wasn't good. I got out and walked up the rocky slope, still arguing with Glen in my mind. Digger the dog burst into a sprint from where she had emerged at the side of the porch, barking happily at me.

'Oh, you.' I wiped my nose. The dog jumped and pawed at my waist and I rubbed her furry head. 'I'm sorry about before.'

Jed Chatt came out the front door of the house and stood watching me, a general look of disapproval on his face.

'I told you to rack off,' he said.

'Yeah,' I said, leading the dog towards him. 'People do that.'

He rolled his eyes, weary, and strode back into the house, letting the screen door slap shut. I noticed how remarkably the house had changed. The porch had been swept bare and the old barbecue was gone. The dog followed me inside.

The lanky, long-jawed man was sitting on the faded couch now with an assortment of plastic parts in front of him, tiny screws and brightly coloured joints. A baby's play gym half-assembled, some of it still in the shipping box beside him. There must have been so much of this activity in the time since I had seen him last. Gathering up, sorting, squaring away his own things. Making room for the new life that had joined him.

Beside the couch on the floor the infant reclined in a fluffy pale-blue bouncer. Now and then Jed extended his leg and pushed on the bouncer with his big, bare toe, causing the baby to bob gently up and down. The man seemed mildly irritated by my presence, but not curious. I might have stood there an hour without either of us uttering a word.

I didn't fully understand the ease I felt around this man, but I knew then that unconsciously I'd been planning to flee here the moment Glen started attacking me. What was it about this man and this place that compelled me?

'You're a strange one, you,' Jed said after a time.

'I get the feeling you might be the same.'

I looked at the infant in the bouncer. An awkward, gummy smile

playing about perfect lips he couldn't yet control.

'Can I?' I asked. Jed said nothing. I extracted the child carefully from his bouncer. He was heavier and warmer than I'd imagined. The baby swiped at my chin, my lips. I kissed his fingers.

'His mother is my niece,' Jed said eventually, glancing at the child's chubby hand encircling my finger. 'I don't know her that well. Or I didn't. Her parents died some years back, and I never was real good at keeping in touch. She wrote me a couple of months ago. Couldn't call me. I don't have a phone.'

Jed left the construction of the mobile and sat back on the couch, rested a bare foot on his knee.

'She grew up over Bandelong way. Even harsher than this, Bandelong. So when she got to the city she was real surprised, and so was everybody else, to tell you the truth. She did her degree, did the extra bits and pieces that come afterwards, whatever they are. And then, to top it all off, she got accepted into this ... this extra-special legal program. Always wanted to be a lawyer, and this program, she says ... There are something like three people in the whole country who get in. Well, she got in. First blackfella in the history of the world to get in. Kind of thing that usually goes to white boys from private schools on the Sydney Harbour there. The other two candidates were just that. They were pretty upset that they were up against her for the position that you get at the end of it. The ... partnership, or whatever.'

The child had gone to sleep in my arms. Wisps of his soft black hair, finer than cotton, shifted in the breeze from the window.

'Same morning my niece was due to go in and sign her big important contract, she finds out about this one.' He nodded at the baby in my arms. 'Everybody has a good laugh at her then. The two other candidates, they reckon they're shoo-ins for the partnership at the end of the four-year program. One of the big lawyer types running the thing, he wants her chucked out of the program straightaway unless she gets an abortion. So she writes me asking what she should do. I'm about the last bit of family she's got. And she doesn't know me from a bar of soap. But she needs to talk to someone.'

'What did you say?' I asked.

'I told her to do the program. And I told her to have the baby. I'd take him until she was through with it, until she found her feet. And if she never found her feet, well, that was OK. I figured if she'd dropped out, she'd have been all broken up about it. If she'd had an abortion, she'd have been broken up about that, too. This was the only way I could think of that she could get out of it without tearing herself in half.'

The infant grizzled. I lifted him higher against my chest and patted his nappy-covered backside. Put my cheek on his head.

‘It’s not the best place in the world,’ Jed said, looking at the walls, still stained from years of neglect, the blazing desert sun rolling by the windows. ‘But it’s a solution to a problem.’

Jed stood. I guessed it was the signal for me to go. I didn’t seem capable, at first, of giving the child back. Some ludicrous part of me saw this place as a solution to my problem. To every problem.

I handed back the child. He held the tiny boy and looked at my eyes. Seemed to know I wanted to stay. Here was a safe place, deliberately constructed on the edge of nowhere, too far into the wild for problems to reach. The kind of place they sang about in sad songs. All the hurt, all the badness, all the worry a person had could be sent here to be swallowed up by this man.

I felt the cruel sense that I belonged here tugging at my chest, even as I headed for the door.

Chapter 96

IT HAD ALL happened so quickly. Love stories were like that, so Regan had heard. He'd got chatting to the teenage Sam Blue at the Christmas party and discovered the gangly, shy, black-haired boy was living with a family in Panania, not far from where Regan was in Picnic Point. Their foster parents knew each other. Sam had only just arrived, having been separated from his sister after their last placement fell through. The boy missed her. Regan had listened, marvelling quietly at his gentle voice.

There was no way Regan could have told Sam what he felt back then. The obsessive thoughts, the dreams about Sam. He wondered if his friend ever suspected. It was a struggle to stop himself from bringing Sam gifts at the house in Panania, turning up too often, staying too late to talk and giggle in the small blue room his foster parents had put him in. Everything Sam said stuck with Regan. He'd shown Regan a picture of a red racer bike in a catalogue, and Regan had begun to see red bikes everywhere deliciously displayed on street corners and in bike racks, unlocked. Regan closed his eyes sometimes and thought about what Sam would say if he brought him one of those racers. Imagined him in awe, crying with gratitude, throwing his arms around Regan, the press of his thin, hard body against his own. Bliss. But it was far too risky. Their bond was one perfect thing he wasn't going to ruin. It was pure, untouchable, beautiful.

Joyous months passed. Sam and Regan would meet on the roadway down to the river. Firelight and smoke in the air, the heady scent of dope near the rock wall or on the grey sand. Circles of other kids laughing, whooping. Regan remembered sitting on the edge of the pier with his feet in the water and some nameless girl's face in his crotch, smoothing back her hair as she bobbed up and down on him, looking over and meeting Sam's eye as another girl worked on him. The stab of pleasure deep in his guts, making his legs twitch. They'd lain with the girls afterwards, whoever they were. The girls were easy to ignore. Regan closed his eyes and felt Sam's elbow touching his, listened to the other boy's breathing. It could have been just the two of them under the stars. He suddenly felt free.

And then, before he knew it, Child Services was there at the door in Picnic Point. His foster parents had decided to travel Italy and couldn't bring him along. Another placement had been arranged. The couple told Child Services to handle telling Regan, because they were

too emotional about it, and they knew he was an emotional boy, too.

They'd meant *difficult*. But they couldn't possibly know that Regan was slowly graduating from difficult to dangerous.

Chapter 97

NOW, REGAN STEPPED silently down onto the toilet in Harriet Blue's apartment and turned around, sliding the bathroom window closed behind him. The gentle click as the latch caught was the only sound in the apartment. He stood in the dark looking at the things on her vanity, feeling sick little zings of excitement at the sight of them. Comb. Pill packets. Creams.

He went into the short hallway and gazed at the gold light falling on the polished floorboards from the living room. This was a good apartment. A solid investment for someone who worked hard and spent little on their social life. Regan knew that the place had been sold, probably to fund Sam's legal defence. In mere weeks, all of this would have to be packed up and shipped out. Regan was glad that he could see it as it was, Harry in her natural environment, the girl Sam had talked so much about.

There was no one home. He was sure of it. The lights must have been a tactic by Harriet to appear at home, something to drive away the press or curious gawkers who might try to take advantage and sneak in.

Regan had the distinct sense of her abandonment of the place as he walked into the study. He looked at the work of the Georges River Killer on the corkboard behind the desk. Pictures of his victims, both alive and as he'd left them, lolling dead on the grey sands like washed-up sea creatures. There were forensic reports here. Criminal profiles. Harry's notes. Regan had seen some of these things already in the briefcase he stole from Edward Whittacker. They were close behind him. But it wasn't over yet.

If only it had all gone the way he'd planned. It would have been so perfect. He'd come across Sam for the first time after leaving prison, and it was there that he'd got his idea. Sam had been standing at the edge of the hall outside a computer lab on the Sydney Uni campus, talking to one of his pretty little students, her long chocolate hair awash in sunlight. Regan had followed and watched and realised that Sam was surrounded by these gorgeous creatures. They waved at him from cafe tables and touched his arm as he went by, smiling, asking about some assignment or another. Sam was so happy. Regan could see it in his stride as he walked home, as he climbed the stairs to his neat, bright apartment. Wasn't Sam just the perfect 'fuck you' to all those care workers and all those families shuffling him here and there,

the raggedy, hollow-eyed urchin Regan knew so well playing tricks in the dark by the riverside. Bad boy. Difficult boy. Unwanted boy. Sam's beautiful world was choreographed as joyously as the opening of a Broadway show. People swinging on lampposts, arms out, soaring voices.

Regan had entered Sam's world like a dark cloud creeping, billowing up over the horizon. He'd wanted to stay longer. It had all been going too well.

He moved out of the study, back into the hall.

And heard a sound in the kitchen.

Chapter 98

I PICKED UP Kash. He'd stayed by our surveillance spot, lying on his belly at the edge of the ridge, watching the sun go down, sweeping the valley with his binoculars. He didn't speak as he got in to the car. There was an icy feeling in the pit of my stomach, that he'd call me out for walking off instead of standing my ground and defending my brother. But my ability to stand my ground was waning. Two more days and the AVO would be lifted, and I could be by Sam's side again.

'We've got a problem,' Kash said, breaking me out of my reverie.

'What?'

'Dez spread the word around town that people aren't to congregate, that we want the pub closed and the main street clear. This seems to have had the opposite effect. People are angry. Defiant. There's talk they're going to gather tonight in the main street as a show of strength.'

'Oh, brilliant!' I snapped. 'What a fantastic idea! We've told them it's dangerous to gather in groups, and what do they do? They decide to throw a party.'

'They're Australians,' Kash sighed. 'We told them to stay away from their local pub. We might as well have waved a red flag in front of a bull.'

There were already people in the main street as we drove through, standing outside shops, talking. Only twelve or thirteen in total, but more would come. There was a strange excitement in the air, the feel of Christmas or New Year's Eve, of community. It didn't seem to matter that someone wanted to kill them all. The mob was stronger than a single killer.

They were wrong. I knew they were wrong.

I spied Mary Skinner, the mother with the young children, walking along the road back towards her house, her two kids running ahead. At least someone was being sensible.

Kash and I parked by the bracken just beyond Jace Robit's property again. At precisely seven-thirty, the man emerged, taking long strides to his ute. Through the growing dark, I could see lights on in Frank Scullen's garage. Headlights swept us as the two men pulled out.

'Come on, fuckers,' I said, starting the engine. 'Show us your big plan.'

Chapter 99

WE PLOUGHED INTO the night. Kash became pointed beside me, squinting into the dark ahead. I left the longest possible distance between Frank's truck and our own, trying not to spook him with my headlights. The trucks disappeared over ridges and hills in the desert.

We were well out of town when the headlights ahead stopped moving. I turned ours off and rolled slowly towards a huge eucalypt surrounded by bush. As Kash and I got out of the car, a group of dingoes somewhere in the vast empty wilderness nearby sent up a howling song.

Here is where I could meet my end, I thought, as I always do when I find myself in situations like this. Rushing into a home where a child is suspected to be in danger, storming the doors of porn studios, dungeons, makeshift brothels. I have plenty of police training to try to combat the dangers of the sniper in the upstairs window, the man with the shotgun behind the door, the tripwire in the hall attached to a grenade. I know to look out for these things. But there's always the chance of a wildcard. A new strategy by the bad guys. Cops die every single day. *This could be the day that it's me.*

I jogged behind Kash across the dirt, head low, drawing out my gun.

The trucks were parked at the base of a high cliff, a split in the Earth's crust cleaved vertically through the enormous rock shelf, only a metre wide. I knew there was probably a lookout just inside the entrance to the cave. Kash took the other side of the entrance. I crept forwards and looked in, saw a pair of stubby legs splayed on the warm earth. John Stieg was just settling in to his position, still tapping through his phone, checking the things that needed to be checked and sending the things that needed to be sent before a long stretch of guard duty. I leapt forwards before he could look up from the phone, knowing his night vision would be ruined by the bright screen.

He put a hand to the gun sitting on the ground by his hip. 'Don't,' I said. I put a hand out. He paused, finger sideways, loose, on the trigger guard.

The man gave in and took his hand off the weapon. He rose reluctantly, rubbing his short beard. Kash's breath was on the back of my neck. It was tight here. Tight enough that in a struggle, I might lose this man. Stieg twisted and I poked him forwards with my pistol, away from the gun on the ground, which Kash swept up into the back of his jeans.

‘Make a noise, and I’ll fire,’ I said.

We walked through the darkness. Ahead of us there came the clattering and crashing of things being set up, men talking, their voices echoing off the walls of the narrow cave. I spied wires on the ground. My breath was coming in short, hot blasts. Tanks. Cables. The sickly glow of headlamps trying to cut through airborne dust. It was hard not to cough.

The crevice widened and we were suddenly upon the other three, Jace Robit nearest to me, tugging a cotton mask up over his nose and mouth, a small jackhammer hanging from his fist. I shoved Stieg and he gathered with the rest of them.

‘Police!’ I shouted, my eardrums pulsing as the sound ricocheted off the close walls. ‘Tools down! Hands up!’

No one complied. It takes a leader, not a stranger, to get them moving. They all looked at Jace.

‘I said hands up, fuckbags!’ I kicked the jackhammer out of Jace’s hand. It clanked to the ground. The man gave a short, hard laugh, raised his hands and interlocked them at the back of his head. I checked Kash’s gun was on them all and lowered mine. I walked around them and looked into the black depths of the crevice beyond where we stood. It seemed to narrow then turn away into pitch blackness.

‘Is there anyone else?’

‘No,’ someone said. I kicked the nearest man’s knee out. He took the hint and knelt. The others followed. There was a lot of equipment here. Plastic and duct tape, buckets of water. I couldn’t get my heartbeat down. My thoughts were racing. Whatever this was, it wasn’t bomb-building paraphernalia. That was good. My hands were shaking on my gun. ‘What the fuck is all this?’

The men didn’t answer. Kash kicked over a bucket of rocks near his foot.

‘Gold,’ he said. ‘They’ve found a gold deposit.’

‘Jesus Christ.’ I glanced at the rock wall beside us, only just now realising that it was covered in indentations only visible in the light of the headlamps. ‘This is where it came from. The package we found at Chief Campbell’s place. Did he confiscate that gold from you? Did you kill him because he found out what you were doing here?’

Jace Robit was watching me. His eyes were fierce above the hem of the cotton mask covering his nose and mouth. I felt like smashing his face with the butt of my pistol. If there’s one thing I can’t stand from suspects, it’s the silent treatment. But I was working through things in my mind. Trying to fit the pieces together.

‘It wasn’t drugs you were all into. It was this. Gold. Theo Campbell shook you down. It’s just like we said.’ I looked at Kash. ‘But he knew

there had to be more. So you killed him. You blew him up.'

'We didn't kill anybody.' Frank Scullen shook his head, glared at me. 'This is bullshit. I'm not wearing a fucking murder charge.'

'Which one of you wrote the diary?' My voice was quivering. 'You wrote the diary to distract us, didn't you?'

'We didn't kill nobody, and we didn't write no fuckin' diary!' John Stieg snapped.

'Then why the secrecy?' I looked at the gold on the ground by Kash's foot.

The men glanced at each other, all but Jace, whose eyes were locked on me.

'Whose land is this?' Kash asked. 'Whose land are we on?'

No one answered. Kash pointed at the ground.

'If this land isn't yours, and it isn't public, then this gold is being stolen,' he said. 'Are we on someone's land right now?'

I heard a click right beside my ear. The unmistakable sound of a hammer drawing back on a revolver.

Chapter 100

REGAN GAVE THE corner of the kitchen a wide berth, walked around through the living room and looked in. There was a man standing there, leaning against the counter, his arms folded and his eyes following Regan as he stepped into view. This man looked disordered, crooked, roughed-up somehow. Like the survivor of some kind of natural disaster, emerging from the forest with windswept hair and hard features, dirty clothes, a starved look. He was big. Muscular. Enormous boots. This had indeed been a very big mistake on Regan's part. Who was this man? Was he Harriet's boyfriend? What else didn't he know about Sam's sister? Once again, his plans were being foiled. The game was changing. Regan felt exhilaration rush through him.

'I really hoped you'd come,' Tox said.

Regan tried to make sense of the words. He glanced towards the door. Was this a trap? No, of course not. He'd have been knocked to the ground by now, windows bursting in, SWAT teams thumping up the stairs. This man was alone. His black pistol lay on the counter, turned away.

The man in the kitchen looked Regan over, sniffed.

'So you're him,' Tox said, eyes roving. 'I've seen pictures of you. Seen the imprint of your hand on the bodies of your victims. Your punches. I guess I thought I knew what you'd look like. But you're different.'

'Different how?' Regan asked.

The man in the leather jacket shrugged his folded arms.

'I guess I hoped you'd be bigger,' he said.

'Bigger?' Regan almost laughed.

'Mmm,' Tox said. He sighed. 'Stronger.' Tox's eyes wandered up Regan's body. 'See, I don't like men who hurt women and girls. I really, really don't like 'em. So I hoped that when I finally caught up to you, I'd be able to hurt you for a good while before having to hand you over to police. I've been looking forward to hurting you.'

Regan laughed. Oh, what an unexpected gift this was.

'I'm sure I can live up to expectations,' Regan said.

The man in the kitchen unfolded his arms, stood poised, his big hands loose by his sides.

'You ready?' Tox asked.

'Oh yes.' Regan smiled. 'More than ready.'

Chapter 101

OF COURSE THERE were others. How had I thought something like this might be limited to five men? Theo Campbell, Jace Robit, Frank Scullen, John Stieg and Damien Ponch. Of course it had spread. Small towns aren't equipped for secrets like this, life-changing secrets. Last Chance Valley was an all-consuming hole in the Earth. Everyone wanted to escape. A few men had found a way, and the others had been able to smell it on them. Their secret hope. I turned my head slightly and the barrel of the man's gun touched the back of my ear. I caught a glimpse of a fat, bearded man. The bartender from Last Chance. Mick the Prick. I smelled body odour and bourbon.

'Drop it. You too.'

Kash and I dropped our guns. Jace's eyes had lost their fierceness now. The man was incredulous, mortified, all his plans crumbling before him.

'Mick,' he snapped at the man behind me. 'What the fuck!'

'Yeah, exactly,' Mick the bartender said, smiling. 'What the fuck. You lot find a fortune and you think you can just pick up and leave with it? You don't think about sharing it around? What a bunch of selfish fucking pricks.'

'Don't do anything stupid,' I murmured, my hands out by my sides. 'We can all walk out of here if everybody just stays calm.'

He ignored me. 'I wondered what you shitheads were up to,' Mick sneered, pushing me forwards. I walked slowly towards Kash, turned, trying not to make any sudden movements. Mick kicked the two men nearest to him until they lay on their stomachs on the sand. 'I seen you at the pub snickering and whispering like a bunch of old bitches. Knew you had something on the go, so I followed you out here. What a surprise. I thought I'd wait, let you do all the hard work for me. But then I seen these coppers were onto you. I had to swoop in before you got yourselves arrested.' He gestured to Kash and me. 'You two. On your knees.'

We knelt in the dirt. The sweat was rolling down my sides now. Mick went to Kash's back and tugged the second gun out of his jeans, kicked him onto his stomach with the rest of the men.

'You,' he pointed at me. 'Take those wires over there, tie them up. And don't think you're going to do it loosely. I'll check.'

I crawled on my hands and knees to a pile of electrical wire nearby. The men had been drilling, sending charges through the rock wall,

exploding bits off to get deeper into the seam. I wondered just how secure this all was, if in the end a collapse from the rock above would bury all of us. A Venus flytrap snapping shut on greedy flies. I looked up. The crack in the earth went all the way up. There were stars up there beyond us all. Maybe there was hope. Mick was muttering to Jace as I crawled over to him and began tying his hands.

‘Sure must be a lot of it for you all to have decided you’ll just take off and leave everyone behind,’ Mick was saying. ‘Let’s see. If I wanted to start a new life, I reckon I’d need a hundred grand *minimum*. A hundred grand could see you set yourselves up pretty well in Thailand.’

‘Fuck off, idiot,’ Jace snapped, his chin resting in the dirt, teeth together. I moved and tied Frank’s hands.

‘But then, you guys have been out here for ages, I reckon,’ Mick mused. ‘I started to notice you acting weird months back. Let’s say it’s three months of ferreting the rocks away. Then Soupy Campbell finds you with some. You have to bring him in on it all.’

‘What’s your plan here?’ I asked Mick. He’d elected me to bind everyone. He must have some level of trust in me. I tried to keep my voice low, non-threatening. ‘You’ll leave us all tied up here and then go raid everyone’s houses, take the rocks and leave. That’s what you’ll do, right?’

Mick didn’t answer. I’d tied all Jace’s men and moved to Kash. His hands were sweaty.

‘Because there’s really no need to hurt anyone,’ I continued. ‘The guys will tell you where the gold is hidden, so you can get away with plenty of time.’

‘Shut up and finish what you’re doing.’

‘You’re talking about theft,’ I said. ‘That’s all. Leave now. Then if you’re caught, you can probably plead out. You do not want to find yourself on the run with six murder charges. When they find us, they’ll shut the whole country down to catch who did it.’

Mick flicked the gun at the sand. I lay down and felt his bulk shift over me, the sickening press of his crotch against my backside as he pulled my arm behind my back with his free hand.

‘Who says they’re gonna find you?’ Mick asked.

Chapter 102

TOX CRACKED HIS knuckles and smiled, and the man smiled, and they rushed at each other.

He was a prison fighter. Tox could tell that right away. You've got to fight fast in prison, before the guards stop you, so Regan faked only once before throwing in his first punch. Tox grabbed the fist as it sailed past his ear, yanked the man forwards and hit him hard in the sternum.

Regan spat air, crumpled in half, fell on the coffee table, smashing it to pieces.

Tox grabbed something – a vase or a sculpture or something, he didn't look – and clubbed the man. Once. The second time was blocked.

The kick in the knee was unexpected. Tox backed up into a bookshelf, sent more objects smashing.

Regan was on him. A punch to the jaw that crunched his teeth. Tox blocked the second swing, palmed his attacker in the nose. Blood down the front of Regan's shirt, fast and heavy. The man ignored it. He was a good fighter. Focused, determined under pressure. He'd have been a good killer. Those girls wouldn't have stood a chance.

Tox saw them in his mind, a tiny flash, smiling teeth and bright eyes, beautiful futures. It was what he needed to refocus himself. He leapt forwards.

Chapter 103

THE PROBLEM WAS tying my wrists with the gun in his spare hand. The cast made things even trickier. He tried, gave up, backed away. I shifted my hands to the ground beside my shoulders, in a push-up position, ready to spring. I didn't know what was going to happen next, but I was the only one with my hands free. It was on me. Sweat was stinging on my burned skin. I planted my toes in the sand, wiggled them down until I felt hard earth. Mick was watching us all. Deciding. I could still talk him out of this. Surely.

'Everybody thinks about getting out,' Mick said gently. He rubbed his beard. 'I mean, I get it. I grew up here, just like you guys. By the time you're old enough to figure out there's a whole other world out there, you've already grown roots. You stay, or you abandon everything. Everyone. There's no in-between.'

He was apologising. Saying sorry for what he was about to do. My throat was tight with tension. I could barely breathe.

'This was your only chance,' Mick said. He pointed the gun at Jace. 'It's *my* only chance now.'

'No!' I screamed. The gun roared, not once but twice. Mick was a seasoned killer. A country man. He'd shot dogs that got too old, horses that got lame, dingoes that wandered onto his property.

He'd shot Jace in the head and turned and clicked back the hammer and shot the man beside him, Damien, before I even got to my feet. I slammed into him, the image of their bucking heads still shuddering through my mind.

There was screaming. Men screaming. The two surviving men, Frank and John, crawled and cowered against the rock walls. Kash was on his feet, stumbling, trying to rip the wire from his wrists. I struggled with Mick for the pistol. His round belly pushed at my chest as he leaned back, hands high, trying to tug it from my grip.

The third bullet hit the wall above us, dislodged rock and dust. It was in my eyes, in Mick's eyes. I stepped back and kicked him in the crotch before he could take aim again. It was a hard horse-kick with my heel leading. He went down. I grabbed the gun and smashed the butt of it over his nose, crushing bone. I pulled it back and swung again, hammered him in the temple.

Kash's hands were free. He grabbed the gun before I could pound the unconscious man beneath me another time.

Jace and Damien were dead. I went to their bodies, turned their

heads, checked for a pulse. Kash was already disappearing through the gap in the rock to call for medical assistance.

I took the wire Kash had stripped from his wrists and flopped Mick onto his belly, started winding it around his wrists. Frank Scullen and John Stieg were watching me, speechless, as I pulled the wire and knotted it over and over again.

‘I should make you arseholes free yourselves,’ I said as I went to untie them.

Chapter 104

THE TACTICS WERE dirty. Tox liked that. He'd pinned Regan on the carpet, tugged and twisted him up into a headlock, but the other man had got hold of a shard of the broken vase and jammed it into Tox's forearm.

He stumbled into the kitchen and pulled the shard from the wound, spraying blood on the cupboards. There was a kettle nearby with a curved handle. Tox grabbed it and threw it, listened to it clunk off Regan's head. There was a wine rack by the door to the kitchen. Regan grabbed a bottle and held it by the neck like a club.

He lunged. Tox grabbed the arm before it came down, smashing the bottle against the top edge of the fridge. He got a couple of punches in while Regan was distracted. They fell against the fridge, rattling things inside. Tox went for Regan's throat, his thumbs gripping his windpipe, crushing tendons. Regan's boots slipped in the wine. He was under him, between his legs. Tox grabbed a handful of shirt. Regan grabbed his ankle, brought him down, tried to crawl away while Tox recovered.

Tox steadied himself against the kitchen counter and spied the knife block. Regan was coughing, gurgling, something in his throat broken or bent out of shape. Tox slid a knife from the block. A lean, mid-size filleting blade. Razor-sharp. He turned towards his victim. The fantasy of every mother and father with a raped daughter. The beast at your mercy, a sharp blade, his legs splayed. Tox would have to hand Regan over to the police alive. He knew that. But maybe there was something he could do to make sure the man never raped a young woman again.

Chapter 105

‘HOW MANY SPARE officers have you got?’ Kash was in the car, the phone pressed to his ear. I knew he was talking to the command chief of White Cliffs, who had loaned us officers to patrol the main street of Last Chance Valley while the people gathered. ‘I need at least two to come protect some bodies and take some suspects into custody. Can you redirect your men? No, not the one we’ve been looking for. Another one. I’ll send you the location.’

I told Frank and John to lie on the ground, and stood at the entrance to the cave in case Mick woke and tried to come out. I didn’t expect him to. I’d knocked him pretty hard. John Stieg was crying, his head on the rocky earth. Kash came and stood by me.

‘Do you believe them?’ he asked. ‘About the diary?’

‘I do,’ I admitted.

‘So the town’s still in danger,’ he said.

It was a breathless, wordless hour. And then Kash and I were back on the road, Kash driving too fast, smashing over plants and logs as we headed towards the highway. We had come so close to death. I had rushed at a gun without thinking. My mind kept trying to reassure me that I was safe, dumping calming chemicals into my veins, attempting to slow down my pulse. But we hadn’t found the diarist. We’d been wrong about Jace Robit and his crew. I only realised I was gripping the seat cushion so hard with my good hand when Kash reached over and touched my arm.

‘You’re making me nervous.’

‘Watch the road,’ I said.

Kash swung the car onto the highway. I shifted in my seat. There was sand all through my shirt and pants, driving me nuts. I pulled my bra away from my body and dumped a load of it onto my stomach. I wriggled in my seat, trying to get it out the bottom of my jeans.

In my left front pocket, another deposit of sand, and a small piece of paper. I pulled out the folded sheet and opened it. Switched on the overhead light. The letters were small and clunky, but I knew the handwriting right away. Had studied it closely.

Dear Officer Blue,

So sad you didn’t want to come away with me. I think we wold have made great partners. I’m sorry for steeling! I know it’s wrong. But its a big bad world out there and I’m gonna see it if it kills me. I’m getting out of here

finally! You're a cool chick. See you round some time.

Zac Taby

'What is it?' Kash asked.

'Nothing.' I wiped my face, tucked the note away. Zac must have left it before he walked out of Snale's house, towards his doom. I'd failed him. I'd failed him.

'Harry?'

'It's nothing. It's fine. Let's get back to town. If the killer shows his face, I want to be on him like wildfire.'

Chapter 106

THE TINY TOWN was lit up like a Christmas tree. People wandering towards the centre from the dark road out of town, cars parked haphazardly on the dirt. Kash and I drove through slowly, blasting the horn and shining the enormous hunting lights at dazed men in Akubras carrying bottles of beer.

‘Fucking Aussies,’ I said. ‘Any excuse to have a piss-up.’

Someone was seriously threatening to kill these people, and they were coming out in force to pretend they weren’t afraid. Horns beeping, shopfronts open. I leaned over and looked at the back car park of the mechanic’s. There was no semitrailer there. That, at least, was something.

We spied Snale telling off a couple of youths and stopped beside her. Her uniform was patched with sweat.

‘It’s a madhouse,’ she panted as Kash rolled down his window. She looked at us, seemed to measure the trauma on our faces. ‘What happened? Are you two alright?’

‘We’re OK,’ I said. ‘We’ll stash the car and come help with crowd control.’

Kash drove on. By the edge of town, there was a streak of white in front of the vehicle. Kash slammed on the brakes. It was Bella Destro, in ridiculous high heels beneath her blue jeans, steadying herself against the asphalt with one hand, a beer bottle in the other. I got out of the car and helped her to her feet.

‘You’re the last person I expected to see out here,’ I said.

‘Woo! Detective Harriet Blue!’ She staggered, grinned at me, sweeping back her hair. ‘Look at all these people! It’s a party!’

Kash honked the car horn, scaring us both. I dragged Bella towards the passenger side door.

‘I’ll drive her home. She’s off her head,’ I told Kash. ‘You meet up with the other guys, give them a hand. I’ll be back in a minute.’

I wasn’t focused. I was sad and hurt about Zac’s letter, about the stupid young lives all around me, kids trying to run off with stolen gold, flopping on the road like wounded animals, cheering and reeking of beer. This was a maddening place. I momentarily felt so beyond rage I could hardly speak.

I was distracted. Not thinking at all as I started driving Bella back the way we’d come, into the dark.

Chapter 107

IN THE CAR, she put her head against the window, the cheerful, clumsy girl I'd witnessed on the road gone. I figured she was tired. My mind was not in the car. It was back in the centre of town, where a killer was possibly planning on breaking out into a shooting spree.

I ran through the checklist of precautions in my mind. I knew Snale and another officer had separately locked down the armoury and the ammunition caches so that even if someone managed to get through their defences, they'd waste precious time trying to get to any useful weaponry. Snale and the team in town would be doing regular check-ins. I should have taken a radio, got onto their channel. No matter. I'd be back there in minutes. We'd need to charge Stieg and Scullen when this was done. Stealing. Unlicensed mining operations on trespassed property. We needed to arrest Mick, alert the families of the dead. That wasn't important now. I shook my head. What was important was keeping everyone safe for tonight. Even if the killer never showed their face.

I pulled in to the Destro property and began driving up the long, lamplit driveway.

'You must feel very alone,' Bella said suddenly. I glanced at her. She was sitting with her hands in her lap, facing the house, her expression calm.

'What do you mean?'

'The whole thing with your brother,' she said as I came to a stop beside the house. 'He's in jail. He's got his own problems to worry about. You're free, out here in the world, wandering around trying to get on with things. No one believes you when you say that he's innocent.'

My brother was the last thing I wanted to talk about. I got out of the car. Left my gun right beside her in the centre console.

Stupid. Stupid.

'No one believes you,' she said again, looking at me as I opened the door for her. 'It must be so isolating.'

'I don't have time for a deep and meaningful,' I said. 'Get out. I've got to go. I'm busy.'

That was when she pointed the gun at me.

'You're not going anywhere,' she said.

Chapter 108

I WAS BEWILDERED. At first, my brain told me this was just another inconvenience on what was shaping up to be a horror of a night. I was still cursing myself for not having a radio.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ I said. ‘Put it down.’

‘Harriet,’ she said. Trying to wake me up. Bring me back down to Earth. ‘Focus.’

Focus. Breathe. I was standing like an idiot in the driveway with my hands by my sides, staring at the gun, the strange, unfamiliar sight of my own weapon pointed towards me and not away. She actioned the weapon expertly, and with that sickening sound I came to.

I looked into her eyes.

‘Oh no,’ I said.

Chapter 109

WITH THE GUN at my back I walked numbly up the driveway towards the house, too shocked to offer much resistance. I'd gone into full denial mode, a symptom of my general stress over the case and my emotional detachment after the murders earlier in the night. Cognitive dissonance, the same thing that affects soldiers, sends them wandering into no-man's-land under shellfire like they're going for a Sunday stroll. This was a game. A prank by a strange drunken girl. She was going to be in a whole lot of trouble when she gave me back the gun. I was going to be in a whole lot of trouble if anyone ever found out she'd played with it. Yes, 'played'. Because she was a girl. A young university student home to study for exams. Her major concerns would be trying to get some proper study time in without wasting the entire vacation watching bad TV and chatting on Facebook.

She showed me into the dining room where just days earlier I had sat with her father and listened to her pick at him about racism in small towns. Dez was sitting in one of the dining-room chairs, as he had been on that day. But he was decidedly less comfortable in the seat than he had been before. A line of duct tape started at his shoulders and wound around and around the chair and his body, over his round belly, now and then splitting to reveal the cloth and buttons of his sweat-drenched shirt. The duct tape around his mouth was so tight his cheeks were swelling purple under the wild eyes that watched me enter the room.

Of course. The massacre plan had said 'Kill Officer Snale', but 'Get John Destro'. Snale was only an obstacle. She could be disposed of easily. But this man was the focus. He was the catalyst for it all. He wouldn't be killed right away. Not until he had fulfilled his purpose.

Chapter 110

I WAS DRAWN straight to the device around his neck, a clumsy thing secured with more silver duct tape that pulled at the loose skin around his throat. A plastic water bottle turned sideways sat under his chin, sloshing with pale brown, almost tea-coloured liquid. I could see wires and fixtures making bumps and veins in the tape around the top and bottom of the bottle. Inside the bottle, awash in the liquid, were more wires crisscrossing each other, tightly wrapped in black electrical tape.

The unprofessional look of the device added to the already deep lack of comprehension I was experiencing. I stood before the man in the chair and looked at the thing around his neck and couldn't believe that it was in any way dangerous. It was so messily constructed, so awkward, that my only concern at that point was the gun on me and the man's rapid breathing, threatening a heart attack.

I looked at the girl with the gun. Of course it had been her all along. From the moment I met her, she'd been desperate to make me and everyone around her aware of her searing dissatisfaction with the town, its people, her father, everything.

She was more than dissatisfied. She was angry. Over dinner her disgruntlement at her father's racism tumbled off her lips like spittle. Her eyes had implored me from across the table. But I'd been uninterested. And that's the automatic reaction she'd received most of her life, I imagined. A default dismissal of whatever bugged her. Pretty girl. White girl. Student. What could she possibly have to complain about? She flicked the gun towards a nearby chair and I went to it and sat down.

'I decided I wanted to use you for Day Zero when I found out you were in town,' Bella began, smoothing her hair down with long, slow strokes. 'It was so amazing, you coming, you being right in the middle of all this. I knew it was a sign. I've been watching you and the case with your brother from the beginning. I watched the footage of you going up to the courthouse for the first day of proceedings. You looked so distressed. I remember thinking at the time – you're going to be the victim in this that nobody understands. You're going to be the forgotten one. The forgotten victim.'

She glanced at her father. I followed her eyes, watched sweat rolling down his temple.

'There will be people who sympathise with your brother,' Bella said. 'And there will be people who sympathise with the dead girls. Their

families. But right in the middle of it all, there's you. Nobody sympathises with you. Nobody believes you. I know what that feels like.'

She went to the dining-room table and carefully plucked up a tattered yellow envelope, thick as a dictionary. I noticed another gun on the table. Theo Campbell's gun. Bella must have taken it the night she stopped the older officer on the road on the hillside, probably with a ruse similar to the one she'd used on me. Helpless, Bambi-legged. The one who needed management. She tossed the envelope onto the ground at her father's feet. Dez winced. The liquid in the bottle at his throat sloshed.

I took the hint and slowly went to the envelope, picked it up and returned to my chair. Calm movements were essential. Don't antagonise her. Don't challenge her. Just listen, keep alert for something you can use. Something you can bring out, nurture, the key to stopping it all. Because this was a clever young woman. Cunning, manipulative. Not the kind of killer who would have carelessly left her diary full of murderous plans in a blazing red backpack at the local rest stop. That's why the bag was red. Why the bag was otherwise empty. It was a red bag or a fucking neon sign. STOP ME. She wanted to be caught. She wanted to be listened to. She had chosen me to stop her.

I opened the envelope, only now realising how badly my hands were shaking. The photographs inside were jumbled together, corners sticking out everywhere. I slipped my fingers in, pulled out a handful.

The first picture was of a young boy sitting with his back against a bare rock wall. He couldn't have been older than ten. Naked. Legs splayed. Another young boy had his head resting on the boy's thigh, face turned inwards, just centimetres from his genitals. Both were clearly unconscious.

I let the pictures fall to the floor one at a time. The same faces. Different faces. Boys and girls in their teens. Some youngsters, tweens. Some of them were simply splayed out, on their own, mostly in the light of a fire. On sand. On rock. Curled on their sides on beds of dry grass. Some of them had been entwined awkwardly together. Heads leaning sloppily on bellies and shoulders, gaping mouths in the dark.

A man began appearing in the photographs. His bulging, white, bespeckled belly. His pale thighs. Dez.

A sickness was rising steadily in my stomach, pressing at the back of my throat. I'd seen pictures like this many times in my work.

'What are you going to use me for, Bella?' I said.

'To get my message out.' She smiled.

Chapter 111

THERE WAS A thump at the door, a fist bashing, a shouting voice.

Tox ignored it, stood over Regan as he writhed on a fallen couch cushion, trying to scramble away. Tox stabbed down, got the inside thigh of his jeans, the cushion, some carpet. He put a boot into the man's leg and tried to hold him still. Tox was making this man feel what his victims had felt. It was so good.

The door burst open. A tall, broad figure in a dark polo shirt, hands out. A neighbour on his way home from work, walking past the apartment door, hearing the scuffle within. Tox was distracted for barely a second, and in that time Regan slipped out from beneath him.

A blow to the side of his head, the smash of something porcelain. Tox stumbled. The knife was gone. He twisted, arm up to ward off another blow, but his enemy had risen and encircled him in a tight embrace.

Tox didn't even feel the first entry wound. The knife slid into him like butter. Practised killer, jamming it under the ribs at the front, into the softness of his abdomen.

Tox gripped Regan, tried to hold him, to make another blow awkward. But the knife came again, sinking deep, pushing the air out of him.

His legs went. Tox hit the floor. His bodily control was gone but his mind was crystal clear. It wasn't over. Couldn't be over. He focused, opened his eyes wide, found the killer moving past him in a dark blue blur of shoes and jeans. He was heading for the good Samaritan in the doorway, a neighbour who'd thought he was breaking up an ordinary everyday domestic scuffle, who had then watched the stabbing, frozen in horror.

Tox reached out with all his strength. Careful now. Don't miss it. The killer's ankle breezed by. Tox grabbed on, under the hem of the jeans, above the low black sock, as Regan bent his knee, exposing the tiny slice of flesh. Tox gripped Regan's ankle. Clamped down with his nails. Held on for as many of the precious passing milliseconds as he could.

Regan hardly noticed the scratch.

The neighbour in the doorway was backing away from him as he advanced.

Chapter 112

I PUT THE photographs on the ground. I'd seen enough. Bella was keeping an eye on me as she readied things on the table, duct tape and three small plastic mobile phones, the kind bought at supermarkets for thirty bucks. Dez was watching the floor, his eyes wandering over tiles, trying to distance himself from what was happening.

'It started when I was fourteen,' Bella said. 'Just after Mum left. For the first couple of leadership camps, he left me at home. But I guess he decided he needed an accomplice, someone to disarm the mothers who didn't want to send their teenage girls away with him into the desert. He had a really good routine going, didn't you, Dad? He'd wait until the second night, after he'd made everyone do the Morse code exercise and report back to their families that they were all having a great time. The second morning starts with a big trek, so by the time we made camp in the evening everyone was always hideously tired and dehydrated. That's when he'd have me spike the water bottles.'

Dez squeezed his eyes shut and burst into tears. The stuff in the water bottle at his throat washed back and forth to the rhythm of his sobs.

'It worked so very well with me,' Bella said, watching him cry with disinterest. 'I was the spectacle. The measuring stick. Everyone would wake up the next day and talk about how dazed and tired they still were. And how they couldn't remember anything after the camp fire. I'd be there to reassure them everyone fell asleep so quickly – we all must have been so tired. When we got back to Last Chance Valley I'd prance around and tell all the parents what a great time we had. What choice did I have but to be his accomplice? I was a kid.' She looked at her father. 'I was a *kid* when he started this.'

'Bella,' I said, 'I can understand your anger.'

'Can you?' she asked. She took a seat at the dining-room table, by her little pile of equipment, and looked at me. 'I guess you've probably seen stuff like this before, doing what you do. You'll know that sometimes the boys and girls who have been drugged, they start to remember. It's not like they're completely unconscious. You can't give them too much, or you might snuff one of them out. So sometimes they'd recall things. Someone pulling off their pants ...' She looked at Dez. Her lip curled in a snarl. 'Someone pushing up their training bra.'

'Bella –'

‘But I was there,’ she said. ‘I was the alibi. I’d wrestle the genie back into the bottle. You were dreaming. You were having nightmares. It wasn’t real. After a while I got so good at it I’d have them believing they hadn’t even dreamed it. Especially the littler ones. You just make them feel ridiculous. And then they never mention it again. Not even to their parents.’

I could hear the distant music from the town pub. A bass beat, the occasional cheer. The big windows that looked out onto the fields were pitch black. What I would have given for someone to arrive unexpectedly, Kash or Snale, someone who would know instantly what to do. Even if it was just to distract her so that I could grab my gun back. But she followed my glance, smiled a little, pitying. We both knew no one was coming.

Chapter 113

IT HAD BEEN her plan. All of it. She'd taken great pleasure in the planning, relishing as she counted down the days. Day Seventeen of the countdown to oblivion. Day Ten. Day Zero. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had counted down to their Day Zero from more than a year out. They'd woken up on the day of the massacre with the excitement of Christmas morning buzzing in their brains. No one had listened to them before. But they would now.

'The first time I ever told someone outright, it was Chief Campbell,' Bella said. 'I thought about going to Sergeant Snale first but I didn't think I'd be able to stomach her pity. She'd have been so ... *understanding*. So gentle with her questions. You know? I couldn't deal with that. So I marched right into Soupy Campbell's office one day and just told him outright.'

'He didn't believe you,' I said.

'No, he didn't,' Bella said. 'And then I knew Snale was off limits, even with all her sickening fucking sympathy. The Chief would have told her to disregard anything I said. She'd have listened. He was her mentor, and he thought I was lying.'

Of course he did. She'd picked exactly the wrong person to try her first sexual abuse confession on: an older man in a position of authority, someone who didn't know her, someone obviously more than willing to get involved in serious illegal activity himself. Theo Campbell would have been well-versed in the angsty drama of the teenagers in his town. They were trapped. Futureless. And here was the daughter of one of the most upstanding men in town making a ridiculous claim with no evidence and no witnesses. Admitting to having been complicit, herself, for years. He'd have fobbed her off as the angry daughter of a selfish dad who didn't want to pay her university fees. She was the hot young student who flirted for top grades and made sexual assault claims against her professor when she didn't get them. The girl next door who undressed before open windows, pretending she couldn't see her neighbour watching, until she was caught, pleading ignorance. She was a dangerous temptress, beautiful liar, the scourge of middle-aged men.

I knew her from my work. She was the unbeliever. Shamed and guilted into keeping quiet or hammered quietly with undermining reasoning until she just couldn't believe herself anymore. She was the one who kept quiet. Waited until she couldn't stand it anymore, then

wrote a note and killed herself.

But Bella wasn't going to kill herself. Her gesture was going to be on a much grander scale. A spectacle. Terror we would have a good long while to think about before we all died, cut down by her bullets, running for our lives. She was planning a Carrie-style showdown.

And no one would be laughing now.

Chapter 114

‘I TOLD REBECCA Greene, my old teacher,’ Bella counted on her fingers. ‘She promised she was going to do something. A week later she transferred out. Took a posting in Darwin. I never saw her again. When Brandon Skinner overdosed last year, I tried to tell his mother, Mary.’ She thrust her arm out again, to the north of us. ‘She insisted it was an accident. Nothing had happened. He was a happy boy.’

I lost a child, Mary’s words came back to me.

It’s all gonna come out.

It’s all coming to an end.

‘I had no proof. I couldn’t find the photographs. He’d hidden them too well. All I had was my story. I told one of the girls who’d been out there with me in the desert on one of the camps.’ Bella’s eyes had glazed over. ‘Mara. I saw her at uni, in Sydney. We got drunk together. She didn’t want to know anything about it. It was too many years ago. She was happy and she didn’t want some weird story from back home, about something she didn’t even remember and only half believed, ruining her great new life. They were just pictures, right?’

We both looked at Dez. His eyes pleaded with his daughter.

‘I believe you, Bella,’ I said, showing her the photographs at my feet. ‘I believe you, OK? I can help you. I’ll take these photographs and your testimony and we’ll prosecute him. We’ll send him to prison for a long, long time. And he will suffer in there, I guarantee it.’ I thought briefly of Sam. The kind of threats a man received when his crime was against women and children.

‘I think I’ve given this town enough chances to stop what’s coming,’ she said. ‘You read the diary. You know I’ve been looking into other people who have done what I’m going to do. The consistent thing among all of them is that they gave people chances to turn things around. I left the diary at the fucking rest stop. I was begging you to do something. *Do something!*’ She sighed. ‘And then here you were, sitting with him, lapping up his words over roast fucking chicken. I can’t let this go on.’

Bella picked up one of the mobile phones on the counter and looked at her father, lazily, the weary teenager tired of Daddy’s bullshit.

Dez writhed in the chair.

‘It’s time to go,’ Bella said.

She pushed the button.

Chapter 115

‘OH MY GOD,’ Whitt said as he walked down the hill from where he’d parked his car haphazardly across an alleyway. The street was blocked by police cars, ambulances, even a fire truck trying to find its way through the mess. Officers were redirecting traffic down a dead-end street and back up the hill towards Kings Cross. There were blockades being put into place. Officers trying to keep the crowds back from the entrance to Harriet’s apartment building.

He’d heard the call on the radio – possible sighting of one of the Georges River Killer suspects. *One wounded, one missing, one dead.* When Whitt failed to get Tox on the phone, and then heard the location of the incident come through, he knew. He grabbed his badge from his back pocket and started pushing through the people, approaching the police tape.

Upstairs, a broken window. Glass in the hall. Whitt was charging up the stairs when he was flattened against the wall by paramedics wrestling a stretcher around the tight corner. It was Tox, his blond hair slicked back, wet with blood, an oxygen mask clamped to his face. Blood all over his neck. He looked waxy, grey.

‘Get out of the way!’ One of the medics shoved at Whitt, leaving a big red handprint on his shirt. ‘Move!’

‘Is he alive? Is he alive? Oh God!’

One wounded, one missing, one dead. Whitt hadn’t prayed in many years. But he was praying now that this man, this strange creature he hadn’t even been sure he liked, wasn’t dead. Because he knew now he had indeed liked him all this time. He was badly behaved, callous, unpredictable. A lot like Harry. Whitt had taken a long time to realise he liked Harry too, and now he’d do anything for her. Further down the hall a big man in a polo shirt was sprawled out on the blood-soaked carpet, two paramedics pumping on his chest.

Whitt ran behind the paramedics carrying Tox’s stretcher.

‘Tell me if he’s alive!’

The paramedics were barking at each other, medical terms, directions. One of them seemed to be wrestling with Tox as they ran along, trying to pull his hands apart. Whitt caught up. Tox was indeed lying with one arm tucked tightly against his chest, the fist closed, holding the arm there with a tight grip on his own wrist. He was alive. Fighting for consciousness, unwilling to let his arm go. Whitt watched, his skin tingling with joy and relief, as Tox’s eyes opened, shifted to

him briefly before rolling up in his head.

‘Sir, I need to get a line into that hand! Let go!’

‘Reverence!’ Tox moaned, the oxygen mask muffling his words.

‘What?’ Whitt shoved the paramedic on his side of the stretcher away. ‘What is it? What did you say?’

‘Reverence.’ Tox was struggling to breathe. He coughed, sprayed the inside of the mask with blood. ‘Rev. Er. Ence.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Whitt struggled. ‘I –’

Tox let his wrist go, reached out and grabbed Whitt by his shirt. The other fist was still balled against his chest. ‘EVIDENCE!’

Whitt heard the word through the mask that time. He looked at the fist on Tox’s chest.

‘Oh God. Oh Jesus. OK! I get it! I get it!’

Whitt dashed into the street, wrenched open the door of the nearest patrol car and grabbed an evidence bag. He ran back to the ambulance just as the medics were loading Tox into the back. Whitt jumped into the tiny space.

‘Sir, you need to get out of this van! We’re trying to save a life here!’

‘No way.’ Whitt took Tox’s wrist and slid the evidence bag over his hand. He was passed out now. The wrist was limp.

Whitt grabbed a roll of bandages from the shelf beside him and began winding them around and around his partner’s wrist, sealing the bag around his hand. ‘He’s got forensic evidence under his nails. I’m preserving that evidence until we can get it tested.’

‘How can you be so selfish?’ one of the medics snapped as the doors shut behind her and the engine roared to life. ‘This man is *dying*!’

‘Not without reason, he’s not,’ Whitt said.

Chapter 116

THERE WAS A *whump* sound, like a fist hitting a taut stomach, and Dez's body bucked backwards in the chair, tipping it onto its hind legs. His head sprayed upwards, a mess of blood and skull and teeth and brain matter lost in a yellow ball of flame that vaporised as quickly as it had ballooned. The headless body rocked forwards, taking the chair with it, and collapsed onto the tiles. I hadn't made a sound. I had no voice. The air was trapped in my lungs, and only when Dez fell did it ease out in a short, harsh yelp.

Blood was everywhere. On the ceiling. On the furniture. On my face.

I like to think I'm pretty tough. But nothing I'd ever experienced had hardened me enough to bear this as coldly and emotionlessly as Bella. I went from understanding and sympathising with her to suddenly being so terrified of her that I could scream. I'd thought I understood. I didn't understand at all.

I watched, frozen with terror, as she took another plastic water bottle from the pile of things on the table.

'Oh God, please. Please don't. Bella, Jesus.'

I'd stood. But she had the gun again and was ushering me back down into the chair with the soothing motions of a mother. She took the roll of duct tape and tossed it at my feet.

'Strap up,' she said.

Chapter 117

WHITT STOOD IN the hospital hallway, motionless. To his left down the stairs was the triage unit where Tox had been taken. The man had died in the ambulance and been resuscitated right in front of him, a pulse lost, a pulse encouraged to return. Whitt supposed that was death. He wasn't sure. A paramedic had clamped another mask over him and sat squeezing a rubber bag, forcing air into his lungs. Another had shone a torch in his eyes, stuck him with needles, strapped things to his limbs. All the while the hand with the evidence bag tied to it remained flopped down by Tox's side, untouchable. Some silent understanding had come over everyone, after the panic of the first moments, that the hand held the evidence of who had done this. Whitt hadn't said anything. He couldn't find the words. But after an hour or so in the emergency room one of the nurses had come out and handed him a glass slide in a little pouch. Whitt had thanked her and run it up to a lab on the third floor. He'd commandeer the lab. Whatever it took. There was no time to waste getting the sample to a police forensic unit.

Now he was in between those two places, the lab where the nail scrapings had gone for testing and the triage department where Tox was fighting for life. He took out his phone and called Harry, but the call rang through.

'Hi,' he said after the message tone. He only noticed, at that moment, that his hands were covered in blood. In fact, his clothes were spattered all over with it. People were staring at him as they walked past, alarm in their eyes. 'Um. Call me ... uh ... when you can. We got a DNA sample from the Georges River suspect. It'll be three hours, they think, before they can give us a result. I'm, um, I'm not sure what to do now. Tox is ... He's ... Just call me back.'

He sat down in a plastic chair beside a vending machine filled with high-sugar snacks. He had to focus now. There were units out there in the night searching for the killer, trying to track down the twelve men who'd been identified by their fingerprints at the abandoned hotel. They were now also checking emergency rooms and medical centres for anyone wounded, knowing Tox would have done at least *some* damage to his attacker. The killer wouldn't have been expecting a man at Harry's apartment. He must have seen the lights on, wondered if she might be there. What had he wanted with Harry? The same thing he wanted with the girls he had taken?

None of it made sense. No, it didn't make sense if the theory was that this man was Sam Blue's partner. Because if Sam Blue was his partner, his friend, he'd have no reason to want to hurt Harry. And why go around and break into Harry's apartment if his intentions for her were good? Had he broken in? There was no way of telling. The door had been smashed down, and neighbours in the building were saying they thought the dead man in the hallway had done it. Had he got in another way?

Whitt needed to find this guy. Going to Harry's apartment had been a bold act. Caitlyn McBeal had escaped him. His face had, presumably, been on the television – even if it was buried among the faces of other suspects. Now he was on the run, probably wounded. The killer must be in crisis mode. He would do now what killers in trouble always do. He would go home. Go to where it was safe. Not literally to his place of residence – the police would be covering the houses of the twelve men. He'd go where his heart lived. Where it had all begun.

But where on Earth was that?

Whitt stood. He had an idea.

Chapter 118

THE LIGHTS OF the town swirled in my vision, the black arms of the cliffs around us. The wind was making me shiver, but I knew it couldn't possibly be as cold as I felt. I tried to walk slowly, to think. The bottle under my chin felt heavy. Bella had rolled the duct tape around and around my neck. It was pulling at my hair. Awkwardly tugging at the skin behind my ear. It was hard to walk with my hands behind my back. The tape there was too tight, jamming my unbroken wrist up against the cast on the other arm. When Bella had asked me to strap up, I'd been pleased with how awkward it was, taping my own hands behind my back. I had started the roll on my good wrist and given myself a little gap between my wrists, hoping she'd think I'd done it by accident. No luck. When Bella had taken over, she'd made sure the bind was nice and secure. My fingers tingled with numbness.

'Speed it up, slowpoke,' Bella said, jabbing the pistol into my ribs.

'I'm going to trip if I go any faster.'

'I wouldn't if I were you,' she said. 'You pull one of those wires out of the cap and the thing will blow.'

'What is it?'

'It's fertiliser,' she said. 'Ammonium nitrate and gasoline, a couple of other things. Swimming in the middle is a cheap mobile phone. Well, the guts of one. I pulled apart the phone and isolated the circuit that comes alive when it rings. When I ring the number, the circuit will spark the fuel. And you're dead.'

'When?' I stopped walking. Stood before her, looked her in the eyes. 'When you ring the phone? If you're going to kill me, Bella, you might as well do it right here.'

'That's not the plan, honey.' She smiled. She waved the gun at me. 'It's in your interest to just keep following my directions.'

'Why?'

'Because otherwise I'll put a fucking bullet in your leg and you'll have to drag yourself to town. That's why.'

She shrugged, the gun in one hand, a phone in the other. I turned and kept walking. Soon we'd come into the reach of the lights. I could see the people standing in the street, hear the clink of glasses.

'Where did you learn to do all this?' I was rambling now, trying to get her talking, even if it was about her devastating plans. I needed to reason with her. She couldn't stay locked in her own irrational mind. 'How did you figure out how to build these things?'

‘It’s all over the internet,’ she said.

We’d checked the IP addresses and searches of everyone in the town. But Bella didn’t live in town anymore. She was visiting.

‘You can find a plan for anything you want,’ she continued. ‘You don’t need complex chemicals or big exciting machines. I killed Zac with the timer from Dad’s oven.’ She sighed, looked up at the stars. A smile crept over her features. ‘Do you have any idea how wonderful it feels to say that? I killed Zac. I. Killed. Zac.’

‘He didn’t do anything to you. He was never a part of this.’

‘They’re *all* a part of this,’ she said. ‘You still don’t get it. It’s a system. You think bad things happen in the world because a couple of people decide to do them? You’re even dumber than I thought, Harry. Bad things happen because a couple of people do them and a bunch of people do nothing about it.’

Eric and Dylan. Elliot Rodger. Seung-Hui Cho. Each of them had been willing to take down innocents. People who hadn’t wronged them personally. When Day Zero came, it was all about rage. Consuming as many people as possible with it, making the point with suffering, whether those who suffered were innocent or guilty. I shivered. Bella walked close to me. We were two friends taking an evening stroll.

‘You think you and your brother got into the mess you’re in because of the actions of *a couple of people*?’ she asked.

No, I thought. She was right. Someone had killed those girls and set up my brother. I had to believe that. But there were other people who had made the whole situation complete. Nigel and his team had got it wrong and come after him, had squeezed a confession out of him, had locked him up and ignored other leads that had to have been there. Journalists had condemned him and the public had believed those journalists. Our own mother’s major concern had been making money from the situation. There was so much rage inside me, and I could share it among so many people. Including myself. I wasn’t there. I was in the middle of the road in some shitty town on the edge of nowhere about to die. I would be just another name in a long list of people who had not been there for Sam.

‘I think you want me to stop you, Bella,’ I said. ‘I think you left the diary for me to find. You took the plan page out, didn’t you? You didn’t want it to be too easy. You wanted to be able to carry on if I didn’t respond,’ I said. ‘But Bella, I’m responding now. You don’t have to go through with this.’

‘Shut up.’ She kicked me in the small of my back. I struggled not to fall. ‘The time for talking came and went a long time ago.’

Chapter 119

THE FIRST PEOPLE to notice us were a group of men I didn't recognise, standing outside the pub, each with a beer glass in hand. They did what so many men do when they're drunk and women come within orbit of them. They pointed and cheered. It must have been the expression on my face that shifted the mood. Cut the cheers short. Maybe it was the gun in Bella's hand. I spied Kash outside the supply store with a pair of patrol officers. His mouth fell open.

People were coming nearer. Absurdly, bizarrely turning from their groups in the street and walking towards us, hypnotised moths attracted to a light. But Bella was nothing like the killer they'd imagined all along with her glittery heels and bright smile, her hair falling perfectly over her shoulders. Kash had his gun up in an instant. Bella waved the mobile phone high in the air. He understood. To the people around us, it was a stunt. A prank. They backed up, murmuring to each other, frowns, the occasional uncomfortable laugh.

I wanted to be sick, to cry out at the visions still flashing before me of Dez's body slumping to the ground. Bella pushed me into the pub. It was crowded here, but quiet, a party ruined. She shoved me to the centre of the stage.

'What a perfect place for this,' she said. There was a strange self-consciousness to her now. Her plan materialising. How could it be this perfect? Surely something would bring it down. She was so used to her dreams being tugged back to Earth. 'The pub, huh, Harry? We'll do it here. This is where people come to forget about things, isn't it? This is where we come to be together. Let's all be together for this.'

'Get down.' Kash was waving people from the tables, directing them away from the stage. He kept his gun trained on Bella, his eyes never leaving her for long. 'Stay calm, everyone. Move towards the exits.'

'Do *not* move towards the fucking exits,' Bella snapped, pointing my weapon at a group of people crouched by the door. 'I'm running this show, you pathetic meathead. Get that fucking gun off me before I push this button and end your partner's life.'

'That device isn't big enough to hurt anyone here but Harry.' Kash pointed at me. 'If you kill her, I'll shoot you, and it'll be over.'

'Mmm.' Bella nodded. Her bravado returned. 'See, that's where the plan gets interesting. This isn't the only bomb in town.'

Chapter 120

WHITT KNEW HE was wrong when he turned the corner and came up against the blockade at the fork in the road. Huge red plastic barriers diverted cars off to the right, away from the river along Henry Lawson Drive. He pulled in slowly behind a driver who was checked and directed away, then flipped his badge open for the patrol cop manning the checkpoint. A light rain was beginning to fall.

‘Detective Whittacker,’ the cop read, shone the torch in Whitt’s face. ‘How can I help?’

‘I just want to do a quick check of the riverside. See if he’s out and about.’

‘He’s not.’ The young cop smiled. ‘We’ve got it blocked off from here to Timbuktu. They’re doing regular sweeps. But you’re welcome to go have a look.’

Whitt waved and rolled on, disappointed. Of course, someone got the idea before him that the killer might return to the Georges River, a place that obviously meant something to him. He got out and looked down the long, narrow stretch of parkland lining the black water. There were police everywhere, plain-clothes and patrolies leaning on trees, looking over maps, shining their torches along the muddy sand beyond the grey brick breakwall.

The stretch of river where the bodies of the girls had been found was no more than three hundred metres long. But Whitt thought that didn’t necessarily mean only that stretch was important to the killer. Much of the police presence was focused here, where the girls had been lain on the beach. Beyond this part of the river there was more parkland dotted with the occasional clearing where picnic tables and public toilet blocks stood, jungle gyms for the kids, public bins surrounded by thousands of beer-bottle caps and cigarette butts.

What was it about this place that meant so much to the killer? Whitt wondered as he walked in the dark between the trees, beyond the reach of the lights. He thought about critical places in his own life from his home in Perth, places that he could smell when he thought about them. Where the ghost of his child self still played on beaches, huddled into big armchairs in libraries and sifted through the crowded tables of treasures in public markets, his mother’s hand in his. Indeed, the only places he could think of that had any deep spiritual meaning for him had cemented themselves in his psyche during his childhood. The Georges River really was a boys’ wonderland. Dark forests that

stretched for kilometres. Huge sandstone rock formations perfect for clambering on, hiding in and having secret conversations. The park was large enough that wild goats and deer populated its deeper parts, appearing on the road now and then. It would be a haven for teens smoking, making out, lighting fires.

Sam Blue had been fairly nonplussed about the place when Nigel's team had asked him what associations he had with it. He said he'd hung out there now and then as a kid when placed with foster families in the area. He hadn't been back in his adult years. It hadn't struck the investigators as odd that the place where the three bodies of his victims had been found hadn't meant much to their prime suspect. They'd assumed he was lying.

Whitt's phone buzzed and he looked at the screen. A text message from the lab. He opened the image and looked at a face, one of the bearded men from the collection of photographs of suspects from the abandoned hotel. Regan Banks. Number eight. His DNA had matched the samples taken from under Tox's fingernails.

Whitt spied a dark pier ahead reaching out into the water. There was a small boatshed near it. He headed that way, thinking he'd get out of the wind to make a phone call to Pops. He'd lost faith in his idea that the killer might be here at the river, with all the police presence nearby. He was only thinking now of his next angle of attack. The danger lying ahead escaped him.

Chapter 121

‘SIT HERE, HARRY.’ Bella smiled, drawing a chair from the edge of the stage. I all but fell into it. My legs were weak, my mind spinning. It wasn’t just the bomb strapped to my throat. It was the stage, its height above the people cowering under tables and huddling in corners, unable to look away from me and my captor. We were a grotesque pantomime, a Punch and Judy show. It was all playing out exactly as she had intended it – better, in fact. Her spectacle was drawing people in from the street to the front windows, crowded at the glass, talking to each other, relaying events inside to those behind who couldn’t see. She drew another chair close to me, so that our knees were almost touching. I thought about the bomb, and how if it detonated now it would probably injure her grievously, maybe kill her. But like the spree killers she idolised, the girl beside me was probably suicidal. All her mental effort over the last few months, or years, had gone into the planning of this event. There was nothing beyond today, Day Zero, that really mattered. Everything had to go perfectly now.

‘It’s like we’re putting on a show, isn’t it?’ Bella said, rubbing my leg absurdly. I gripped the back of the chair with my bound hands. ‘A kind of interview. Harry, why don’t you ask me what’s going to happen next?’

‘What’s ...’ I swallowed. My mouth was bone dry. Kash had cleared a path between the tables and the stage. He’d rush here when he had the chance. But for now he could only hold Bella in the sight of his gun. ‘What’s ...?’

‘Well, you’re going to make a choice,’ Bella said. She only had eyes for me. ‘I’ve chosen you because I think you’re the best person to demonstrate my point. I’ve told you what the people of Last Chance Valley have done. What they’ve allowed to happen. You know what kind of people they are. I want you to really consider that. Weigh it objectively in your mind. Kind of like a jury member would, you know?’ She tapped my temple hard with her index finger, almost knocking me off balance.

‘We haven’t done anything!’ someone yelled from the back of the room. An older woman. ‘She’s crazy! Bella, don’t do this!’

‘Help!’ A young man was crying by the base of the bar, his hands wrapped around his head. ‘Please! Let us out of here!’

‘Stay calm.’ Kash was inching towards the stage. ‘Everybody just stay calm.’

‘There’s another bomb,’ Bella said, ignoring them. ‘It’s somewhere near. Maybe it’s here, in this building.’ She gestured to the audience below us. ‘Maybe it’s out there somewhere. Under someone’s house. In someone’s kitchen.’

‘Maybe it’s nowhere.’ I licked my lips. ‘And you’re lying.’

She nodded. ‘I guess you’ve got to consider that as an option. Look, trust me, it’s there. It’s the biggest one I’ve made. I used all my leftovers. All the fertiliser I ground up to make these.’ She tapped the bottle at my throat, making the liquid slosh against my windpipe. I winced, Dez’s death flashing again across the backs of my eyelids. ‘I’m going to give you a choice. You can save these people. Or you can save yourself.’

‘Harry.’ Kash’s eyes were desperate. I thought of him in the hospital in White Cliffs. His broken look. He put a hand out. ‘Don’t. Don’t do anything.’

‘I’m going to give you this mobile phone,’ Bella said. She reached around and put it into my hand. My fingers were numb. I didn’t know if I was gripping it too tightly, or not tightly enough. I imagined myself squeezing the phone wrongly, setting off the bomb at my throat before I had time to think. Bella smoothed my arm with her warm hand, stroking my bicep softly. ‘There’s only one button you need to press. The big one. Twice. I’ve programmed the number of your device into it. It’s the only number it has. Push twice, and you die.’

Bella looked at the people cowering below us, their stricken faces. This was what she’d wanted. Complete power. Complete control. This was her vengeance. They were listening to her now. And it was too late. Gloriously, hideously too late.

‘If you don’t push the button, I’ll push mine.’ She lifted another mobile phone and made it do a little dance in the air. ‘And someone else, maybe many people, will die.’

‘Harry, listen to me,’ Kash was saying. ‘You don’t have to do anything right now. We need more time. Bella, you need to give us more time. We need to talk about this.’

‘The time for talking is over,’ she said again. Bella stood and stepped back out of the blast zone. I looked at the phone in her hand. Her thumb was poised over the rubber button just below the screen, the biggest button on the phone. Her eyes searched mine. Exhilarated. ‘What are you going to do?’

I looked at her and pushed the button.

Chapter 122

WHITT STOOD IN the doorway of the boatshed, looking at the man on the pier. For a moment he tried to convince himself that the figure sitting there was a pile of ropes, a large barrel with some buoys lying beside it. Anything other than the shape of a man. It was impossible. But as he blinked his vision adjusted to the dark, and he looked at the bright outline of the shaved head, the gentle slope of the broad shoulders beneath the damp T-shirt. He was sitting with his legs crossed under him, his hands on his lap, looking at the water.

Whitt slid his mobile phone out of his pocket and looked at the screen. No reception.

‘It’s the power station,’ the man said without turning.

Whitt jolted at the sound of his voice. Around him, ropes hanging from beams shifted gently as the wind raced up the river. He took out his gun and actioned it. The man on the pier breathed in once, then out, coughed a little. He was wounded. Whitt could see that now. He was slightly crooked, favouring his right side.

‘The power station,’ the man went on, waving a hand, ‘up on the hill. It interferes with phone reception down here on the water sometimes.’

‘You’re Regan Banks,’ Whitt said. ‘Sam’s ... Sam’s partner.’

Regan turned and stood. He was much bigger than Whitt. The detective couldn’t know if he was imagining or genuinely remembering it, but he saw a flash of this man in his mind coming up behind him in the car park of his apartment building. The smeared reflection of him in the stainless-steel doors of the elevator. His face was long, pointed. Expressionless. This was the man who had taken those girls. Whitt could smell it on him. The taint of dead dreams. He had none of Samuel Jacob Blue’s vitality, his nervous innocence. This was a being who snuffed out of lives.

‘We’re not partners,’ Regan said.

Chapter 123

IF I HAD to make the decision, I wanted it to be quick. Not two-pushes quick, but one-push quick, something I could do before I thought too much about the pain that was coming. Everything I would lose. The phone beeped. In my hand, I knew, the phone number for the bomb at my throat was listed on the screen, called up from the 'Last dialled' list. All I had to do was confirm the call. Send the electrical impulse through the machine, up to a tower, back to the receiver in the bottle at my throat. The people around me were watching, their jaws set, hands covering trembling mouths. My victims, if I wanted it so, if I deemed their lives less important than mine.

The strange thing was, I could see it. I could see me making the decision to save myself. No one is a hero in situations like this. The brain is trained to preserve the body, and as I sat there it was flooded with all the rage I needed to resist the temptation to take my own life in place of theirs. These were people who ignored the helpless in their midst, the man on the edge of their town who lived as though in exile. These were people who refused to believe that a predator walked among them, who ignored or misunderstood a desperate girl when she tried to confide in them. Nothing stays secret in places like these. In small towns, secrets are shared about, held close to hearts. This was a family. They protected their own, no matter how bad the blood.

Bella wanted to make a mark. To be remembered, the way Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were remembered after the Columbine shooting, monsters on a rampage, cutting through young lives like butter. The way Seung-Hui Cho was remembered by every student who walked onto the Virginia Tech campus. If only one person ever remembered what Elliot Rodger did and altered their behaviour because of it, he'd have been happy with that. Bella had said that the time for talking was over. I would be her manifesto.

'I can't do it,' I said. Kash was at the edge of the stage now, mere metres from me. If he came any closer, he'd be in my blast zone. 'I have to push the button, Elliott. I have to.'

'Really?' Bella sneered. 'You're really going to die for these idiots?' She looked at Kash, incredulous. 'She can't be serious.'

'Harry,' Kash said. 'Just wait. Wait.'

'The bomb might be anywhere,' I told him. 'It might be under Mary Skinner's house. She's in there now with those kids. It might be out there,' I looked at the people beyond the windows, huddled together,

just as Bella had known they would. 'I can't. I can't risk it.'

'You don't even know these people,' Bella murmured, her eyes pleading with me. Begging me to prove her right. To prove that, like the people of Last Chance, I was only out to protect myself. 'Think about everything you have to lose. Think about your brother.' There was a smile dancing at the corners of her mouth. This was what she had wanted. A hero laid bare before the undeserving mob. Surely I'd save myself. Surely I was selfish, just like the rest of them.

'I have a lot to lose.' I nodded at the girl who would be my killer. I thought about Sam and the tears threatened. 'But I didn't take this job to protect myself.'

It was the only way I could think to say it. That being a police officer was the one thing about myself that I thought was worthy. From the moment I'd been born, I'd been a problem. An inconvenience. A failure. A burden to be shifted from place to place, only for as long as I avoided causing unacceptable levels of trouble. When I became a cop that feeling went away. Being a cop was my purpose, my penance.

'I'm sorry,' I told Kash.

I pushed the button a second time and heard the phone beep.

Chapter 124

‘YOU ... YOU’RE *NOT* partners?’ Whitt said. He could hardly talk. The words seemed stuck on the tip of his tongue. The gun in his hand was trembling as excitement coursed through him. A strange, electric joy he knew he had to contain. ‘You framed him. You framed Sam Blue.’

‘Yes.’ Regan nodded, his hands out by his sides, bracing. It seemed he was ready to take the bullet Whitt was threatening him with. ‘I framed him. Sam is innocent.’

Why? Whitt wanted to cry out. But no, he could get the story later. ‘Put your hands on your head. You’re coming with me.’ Right now, Whitt needed to take this man into custody.

He couldn’t believe he’d finally stumbled onto the solution to it all. Here, right before him, stood Sam’s freedom. Harry’s redemption. Justice for Tox. Whitt felt giddy, off balance. He steeled himself. This was it. He was going to end it all. Save everyone.

‘Put your hands on your head,’ he repeated, stepping forwards.

Regan had been waiting for the approach. He reached up, and in a movement so fast that Whitt barely followed it, he lifted the loop of the rope hanging by his side off of a hook on the wall.

Whitt heard a whizzing noise above him. The clunk of the kayak smashing the top of his skull was almost drowned out by the sound of the gun going off in his hand.

Chapter 125

THE SOUND OF the beep seemed to echo, to stretch on forever. I found my eyes were squeezed shut, my lips drawn back and teeth bared. I listened for the *whump* sound, expecting pain. But all I heard was the thumping of my heartbeat in my ears, the cracking of my teeth as they ground together. I opened my eyes. A long, low howl escaped my lips as the air rushed out of my lungs. Relief and terror intermingled in one hard, hot knot in my stomach.

By sheer automation, my limbs working at a will of their own, I pushed the button again. And again. The people around me were realising what was happening, but I wasn't. All I knew was that I should have been dead and was not. No further thoughts would come. My thumb kept plunging down and the phone kept beeping, even as everyone in the room leapt into action.

The people rose to their feet all at once, as though spurred by a starter's gun, making for the doors. Kash threw himself at Bella, who was staggering backwards, knowing he was coming, lifting her phone, the one connected to a bomb somewhere nearby. Her thumb coming down.

Kash grabbed her ankle with one hand and yanked her off her feet. The phone crashed and slid on the boards of the stage away from me. I dropped onto the floor, trying to shift forwards on my knees towards it. I had to get it before she did.

I heard Kash and Bella struggling on the ground before the stage, her squeal of rage.

'Get off me!' she roared. 'Get off me!'

I lost my balance. Fell on my chest. The duct tape around my wrists seemed impossibly tighter. My phone had failed. There was no way we would be so lucky with Bella's. If she got a hold of it, she would detonate the bomb hidden in the town. I was only an arm's length away from the device lying on its side near the back of the stage. I heard Kash cry out. He'd lost his grip on her. The stage shuddered as Bella ran over the top of me, her hands reaching for the phone.

I saw, as if in slow motion, her fingers lifting it from the ground.

I squeezed my eyes shut as the sound of the blast rang through my skull.

Chapter 126

THE GUN SLID out of Whitt's hands as he hit the floor of the boatshed, the weight of the kayak that had been slung across the ceiling knocking him into the ground like a nail bent beneath an enormous hammer. The gunshot took Regan in the shoulder, spinning him backwards. Whitt looked up in time to see the man fall, his boots slipping on the wet pier.

Whitt shook off the temptation of unconsciousness and scrambled forwards, ignoring the dark shadows at the corners of his vision. He threw himself through the doorway and off the pier, into the cold, rushing water.

Regan was there, an impossibly heavy, impossibly strong monster, reaching up and encircling him in an embrace. They struggled in the thigh-high waves, Whitt's arms and hands seeming sluggish, the blow to the head making him an easy opponent.

Regan's hands came around his throat, and before he could utter a cry Whitt was under the water. The muddy, salty taste of it was at the back of his throat, in his lungs. He bucked and twisted, but in seconds the man had him pinned against the silty bottom. He scratched at the iron hands that held him, grabbed desperately for a rock, a branch, anything to hit him with. Whitt reached for the gunshot wound in the man's shoulder just as the darkness began to close in again.

'Fuck!' Regan cried. Whitt had stuck his thumb into the hole, pushed upwards. Whitt rose out of the waves, vomited water. There were lights on the sand. He hadn't realised how far into the water they'd been dragged. The river was sucking at them both, the water waist-high now, pulling on his tired limbs.

'Put your hands up!' someone screamed from the shore. 'Put your hands up!'

'No!' Whitt turned, heard Regan's gasp of surprise beside him. He put his arms out. 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!'

The shore lit up with white flashes as they fired. Regan's body jolted once, twice. He sank into the water.

Chapter 127

I LAY AS still as possible, my cheek against the floorboards, my whole body aching. Bella's foot was by my face, her heel out of the glittery strap, the ankle tendons relaxed. I looked up and saw the phone lying in her limp hand, her thumb on the button. She hadn't pushed it. The blast I'd heard had come from above. Higher, higher, I lifted my eyes to the second-floor railing where Officer Victoria Snale was standing with her arms hanging over the polished wooden banister. The rifle in her arms was still smoking from where it had dispensed a single shot straight down into Bella's head.

I shifted up onto my knees, still trying to orient myself. The floor felt like it was tilting beneath me. Kash was there, taking the phone from Bella's dead fingers and setting it aside. He turned to me, plucking at the tape around my wrists.

'Get it off me,' I begged. 'Get it off.'

Someone handed him a pair of scissors and he slipped them between my sweat-soaked neck and the rolls of duct tape beneath my ear. He peeled the bomb from my throat and handed it off to someone. I could hear Vicky crying. I looked up in time to see a young police officer taking the rifle from her hands.

'I killed her.' Snale took in a hitching breath that came out of her in sobs. 'I've never killed anyone before.'

'It's OK,' the officer was saying, taking her hand as he led her down the stairs. 'It's all OK now.'

I sat numbly on the stage by Bella's body and looked at the people around me slowly, uncertainly moving out of the pub, arms around shoulders, some stopping to hug just outside the doorway. In the movies, this would have been the moment for triumphant cheering. For half-humorous one-liners cracked with relief that would lead gently into the credits, the camera panning away from the town and into the night. But the dread wouldn't lift from my shoulders. I couldn't find the strength to move. Kash seemed to sense it and crouched beside me, putting a careful hand on the back of my neck.

'Do you think you can stand?' he asked.

'I have to,' I said, gripping on to his shoulder. He slipped an arm around me and brought me to my feet. 'I need to get out of here.'

'What?' Kash said. 'Right now?'

I nodded, let him help me to the door. Something deep inside me was telling me that all was far from OK.

Chapter 128

I IGNORED THE instinct still as the sun rose and I pulled the borrowed police cruiser over at the edge of the hillside topped by Jed Chatt's ramshackle house. I shut off the engine. I hadn't turned the radio on. I couldn't bear to hear reports about what had happened in Last Chance only hours before. Neither Whitt nor Tox were answering their phones. As I'd left the town, a couple of people were hounding Vicky as she sat on the edge of an ambulance, drinking water someone had brought her and trying to get over the shock of her first kill. I'd wanted to say something to her, something reassuring about taking a life to save another. That although the memories never leave you, and sometimes late at night the faces of your victims still come, the pain of it dies away in time. I'd killed. It wasn't the worst thing I lived with every day. But instead I'd left Vicky sitting there in the care of a paramedic. She would be alright. She was stronger than me.

I hadn't said goodbye to Kash either. He'd run off almost immediately to evacuate anyone in the town who was still in their house, to see if he could locate the device Bella had hidden out there. Her plan hadn't worked. Zac Taby had been her last victim. As I was loading the car with my belongings, one of Snale's neighbours got word to me that Kash and the other officers had indeed found an explosive device under a house on the edge of town. The bomb had been located right beneath their youngest child's bed, under the floorboards. I knew Kash would deal with it. I had one errand left to run, and then I was going home.

It was my Day Zero. I could finally see my brother.

As I walked up the stairs to the porch of Jed's house, my temples throbbed. I figured I must be getting sick. Just my luck to come down with something the moment I was about to re-enter the fight for my brother's life. I knocked on the door and a voice inside told me to come in.

There were more advances in Jed's shack becoming a family home. I looked at the cloth on the table by the window, the newly painted back wall. The tall man was sitting at the far end of the table, shirtless, a pair of checked pyjama pants on his long legs. The muscles in his upper shoulders twisted and tightened visibly beneath his golden-brown skin as he screwed the lid back on a jar of PVC glue. There was a wooden toy on a sheet of newspaper before him. A painted duck with a newly re-attached wing.

The baby was nowhere to be seen. Too early for him yet. I set the small rock on the table carefully so as not to make too much noise. I knew a sleeping baby was a precious thing.

When Jed spoke, his voice was low.

‘What’s all this, then?’ he asked, looking at the rock.

‘This,’ I said, ‘is a ten-gram nugget of solid gold.’

The outer edge of his left eyebrow twitched briefly. Besides that, he gave no indication of emotion. I picked the rock up again and looked at it, rubbed some of the dirt from its exterior and revealed the mustard-yellow metal beneath.

‘There’s a lot of it,’ I said. ‘Last night, Jace Robit and Damien Ponch were killed in an ambush trying to get the last of it. They found a gold deposit in a cave outside Last Chance Valley, and they’ve spent months there extracting the metal in secret and stockpiling it. Two of their friends survived the ambush. A couple of patrol officers picked them up and the men are now in custody, being questioned. The guys estimate they have pulled about two and a half million dollars’ worth of gold out of the cave over the last few months. They were planning to run off with it all. Start again. A new life overseas.’

Jed considered this. We listened to the baby stirring in the next room. After a few seconds the child fell silent again.

‘What’s it got to do with me?’ Jed asked.

‘The cave is on land the government handed back to your family,’ I said. ‘Rightfully, every ounce of the gold that was extracted belongs to you.’

I put the nugget down in front of him. He stared at it, his lips sealed.

‘Two and a half million dollars?’ he asked eventually.

‘It’s a rare find,’ I said. ‘Almost unheard of. There’s probably more in the area that the men were mining. I don’t know about these things. An officer will come out and see you, tell you what’ll happen next.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’ he said.

‘No idea,’ I answered. I walked towards the door. ‘Sell the land to a goldmine. Keep it and mine it yourself. Get rich, buy Last Chance Valley and reduce everything in it to ashes. Buy your niece her own law firm. Throw all the gold they found back into the cave and continue on exactly as you are.’ I laughed. Shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

Jed had forgotten all about the gold on the table. He was looking at me in the doorway. I was frozen there. Something was telling me that if I just stayed here inside the threshold, in the cool of this man’s house, everything was going to be OK. This was a safe place.

Jed stood, and his expression made the torn feeling in me all the more real. He looked sad to see me go.

‘You don’t look right,’ he said. ‘Come back in and sit down.’

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I’ve got to go.’

The baby boy in the other room started crying. We ignored it, watching each other, both wanting to speak. But there was nothing more to say. I made a choice. Perhaps the wrong choice.

I turned and left.

Chapter 129

REGAN SHIFTED IN the driver's seat. His wet clothes were sticking to the seat cover, the heat of his body fogging the windows. He had almost passed out in the darkness behind the service station as he sat binding the gunshot wounds in his shoulder and stomach, shoving wadded fabric he'd ripped from a blanket in the back of the car into the blood-soaked flesh. He'd tied pieces of the thin blanket awkwardly in a loop under his arm and around his neck, rolled it tight around his gut. The dizziness, the pain didn't matter. He needed to keep ahead of the roadblocks before they came into place. He'd go to ground later and think about getting his wounds treated. One step at a time. He'd survive. He always survived.

Getting away from the officer in the water had been easier than Regan imagined. He'd felt the impact of the bullets and fallen into the waves, and in the confusion, the rushing people and the bouncing lights, he'd simply slipped away. Dived low, come up shallow, dived again. Let the sucking current take him.

The swirling panic he'd felt as he crawled out of the river on the opposite bank to the police had reminded him of that night long ago. The last time he saw Sam.

It had been a starless night. Low clouds slithering across the sky above the tops of the black pines, reflecting the dull orange glow of the power station. It was almost as though no time had passed at all. He'd been seventeen years old. Sam about the same. Two idiot teens walking in the dark together, talking over each other, trying to get through it all, everything that had passed in the time they'd been separated. There had been so much to say.

Regan had been careful about his words. He didn't want to let slip words he'd never dare say in real life. *I love you, Sam. I've needed you here.*

Hours ago they had come down to the river, to their favourite spot. They'd gone to the hanging tree and swung off the old rotting rope there. Regan was so glad Sam was back, even if it was only for this night. Sam was being bounced through overnight care for stealing his last foster father's car and joyriding through the city. He'd be put in a group home down in Nowra for a few weeks until they could see him through a rehabilitation program and rehome him.

Though Sam would be swiftly out of Regan's life again, it wasn't going to be like last time. They were going to keep in touch. Sam had

a mobile phone now. They were going to be together. A year, and they'd be eighteen years old. Legally eligible to be released from state care. They could do what they wanted. Completely and utterly free. Regan had already started counting down the days.

It was Sam who spotted the light that evening. They'd been strolling back along Henry Lawson Drive, about to cut through a park into Revesby Heights. Back to Regan's foster house, before his carers noticed he was gone. The light was at the back door of a small fibro house off the edge of a children's park. The two boys sank onto the rubber seats of a pair of chain swings, twisting this way and that, letting the momentum spin them around.

'Bit late for the vet to be open,' Sam had commented, exhaling cigarette smoke.

'Maybe it's a rabbit with a stomach ache.' Regan lit his own cigarette, squinting at the door. 'A kangaroo with its pouch stuck shut.'

'You're weird,' Sam had said, pushing off and swinging hard.

Regan snorted. 'Lots of money, being a vet.'

The two boys swung back and forth, the iron frame squeaking above them. Regan put his feet down eventually and dragged himself to a stop.

'Maybe we should go in,' he grinned, watching Sam swing. He took a knife from his back pocket and slipped the blade open with a snap. *'Gimme all your cash or the puppy gets it!'*

Sam laughed.

'I'm serious.' Regan slapped his friend. 'Come on. Let's go have a look.'

'No way.' Sam dragged himself to a stop. 'We'd get caught.' 'As if!'

'They've probably got cameras. Security guards.'

'Security guards?' Regan laughed hard. 'It's a fucking vet! Who robs a vet?'

'Exactly.'

'Exaaaactly.' Regan grabbed Sam's arm, felt his bicep beneath the shirt. He squeezed. 'The dude won't be expecting it. Let's get what we can and go into the city. This is a great idea!'

'This is a shitty, shitty idea.' Sam got off the swing. 'I'm not interested. I've got weed at home and it's not gonna smoke itself.'

'Come on. Don't be a pussy.'

'I'm not a pussy,' Sam spat. His fury was surprisingly quick, rising from nowhere. 'You're the fucking pussy. Talkin' about sticking up places like a fucking gangster. Who the hell do you think you are?'

'I've stuck up places.'

'No you haven't.'

'Yes, I have.' Regan stood. Something inside him was stirring,

turning in his chest. It felt like fingers creeping around his heart, threatening to squeeze. He'd said the wrong thing. He needed to fix it. But the words kept coming. The anger kept rising. He couldn't lose Sam. Not now. 'You don't know me. You don't know anything about me, man.'

'Whatever.' Sam started walking off. Regan was beginning to tremble. He squeezed the knife so hard his knuckles cracked.

'Come back here!' he cried. 'Sam!'

Sam walked. Regan shook. He could almost feel something uncurling in his stomach, petal by petal or wing by leathery wing. Sam disappeared around the corner and into the night. The sound of his footsteps faded. Regan tried to swallow but found his throat was blocked.

Pussy.

Regan walked towards the door of the veterinary clinic. The light fell over him, glowed on his fingers as he wrenched the handle down.

Chapter 130

THE WOMAN INSIDE the veterinary clinic had been Doctor Rachel Howes, twenty-three years old. A newly registered practitioner in the medical treatment of animals. Beautiful chocolate hair, long and heavy. So much potential. Regan had entered the clinic in what the prosecutors later called a 'psychotic state'. He'd taken mere seconds to kill her. A dozen dogs and cats watched. He'd retreated to the sound of their howling and barking, \$62.75 retrieved from the cash register. Regan's defence lawyer had told him that had it not been for an anonymous call to Crime Stoppers, police would have had little chance of solving the case.

The call had come in only fifteen minutes after Regan entered the clinic.

Sam. Gentle, big-hearted Sam. Of course he had called the police. Sam acted tough, but he didn't want to see an innocent vet robbed of their day's takings any more than the average person did. Sam couldn't possibly have known what viciousness Regan would unleash on the poor, unsuspecting Doctor Howes. Sam had never seen the thing that lived in Regan, growing there behind his eyes, the darkness spreading, waiting for something to finally bring it to life.

Sam hadn't known that Doctor Howes had died. Sam hadn't known that his phone call had got Regan arrested. He hadn't known that Regan went to jail just three months later. That year after year he'd thought of nothing but Sam.

He'd thought only of coming back and finding Sam there in his perfect life. Oh, his beautiful plans, spinning around and around like a fine spider's web, surrounding Sam long before the man knew the invisible strands were there. Regan followed and waited until Sam breezed by one of his pretty-picture girls, and then he snatched them up. Sometimes he was so close, he was sure Sam would turn and see him. Hear the girl scream. The last one, Rosetta. He'd grabbed her out of the mouth of a side street just seconds after Sam passed. He'd been able to smell Sam's cologne as the man moved behind him.

Linny was supposed to have been the last one. He'd decided to make this one different. Take her and set her up at the hotel, splay her out, ready for Sam. Ready for him to see her, so glorious in herself, and yet so incredible as a part of his plan. *This is what I did for you*, Regan had wanted to tell Sam as they stood there before the dying girl. *This is what you made me*.

But Linny had slipped away from him. He'd got Caitlyn instead. No matter. She'd do. And then the terrible news that Sam had escaped him, too.

It was OK. If Regan was anything, he was adaptive. He kind of liked it when things became chaotic, went awry. The little jerk of his heart as the rug slipped out from beneath him.

Now he'd discovered Harry. And his plans for her would put his former work to shame.

Regan was shaken out of his daydreams by the pain. He hugged an arm into his side and re-gripped the wheel, waiting for the spasms to pass. He needed to get off the road soon. It wasn't finished yet. He turned onto the highway heading west and followed the ramp down to the deserted road, picking up speed.

Chapter 131

I DRAGGED MY suitcase along the walkway between the plane and the airport terminal, listening to it clunk over the rubber seams in the grey carpet. I knew people were staring. I hadn't showered, changed, fixed my hair or so much as washed my face since the previous morning. There was grey duct-tape glue adhered to the burned skin of my neck. Blood spatter on my shirt. I'd ignored the number on my ticket and gone straight to the back row of the plane, sat there staring out the window and saying nothing until we landed. The flight attendants did not approach me, nor did anyone sit near me. They might have known who I was. Or they might simply have been terrified by my appearance. I didn't know. I was counting the seconds until I got home, and that was all I had the mental strength for.

My phone beeped as I turned the corner. My mother. I opened the text as I walked.

They just told me about Sam. I'm sorry but I have to keep the money.

I stared at the text, trying to understand what it meant. It didn't matter. I didn't have time for her. My Day Zero was mere minutes away.

As I walked into the terminal, a hand reached out and touched me. I turned and saw Edward Whittacker standing there.

It was all I could do not to cry. He looked as bad as I did. Strangely damp. Blood-soaked. He was steadily working on two black eyes, a blow to the head, it seemed. This was not how I was used to him looking. His shirt was torn. He grabbed my arms before I could throw myself at his chest and held me achingly away from him. His eyes were filled with tears. I didn't get to ask him how he knew what flight I was coming in on. Why he was there. Why he wouldn't let me touch him.

'I need to talk to you before you hear it somewhere else,' Whitt said. He glanced at the people around us, many of whom were staring, pretending to stop and adjust their bags. 'Tox ... Tox found the killer. He fought him. He got injured. He's stable at the moment but it's ... it's complicated. He's ... not well. He's on the edge. Last night I cornered the killer. Regan Banks. He told me that he set your brother up. He told me Sam is innocent.'

I grabbed onto Whitt's shirt. I held on, partly so I didn't fall. Partly so that I could shake him if I needed to. My whole body was afire. He wiped at the tears running down his cheeks.

‘He got away,’ he said. ‘I let him get away.’

‘We’ve got to find him,’ I said. ‘We ... Where was he last seen? Have there been sightings since? Where’s Tox? What hospital is he in?’

‘Harry.’ Whitt held on as I tried to twist away. His grip was hard. Painful. ‘Word came through from the prison a couple of hours ago. There was an incident early this morning. A fight broke out in Sam’s cell block. Harry, your brother’s dead.’

Chapter 132

I STARED UP at Whitt's eyes. The airport around me had been reduced to nothing. No light. No sound. Just a hollow in which this man and I stood. The words tumbled out of him, even as I willed them to stop. Whitt ran a hand through his filthy hair.

'Sam's dead,' he said again.

The words rang in my mind, vibrating, the echo of a bell struck hard. I held onto Whitt's shirt. He pulled me into his chest, wrapped an arm around my head, trying to shield me from the onlookers I could still see over his shoulder. Whitt didn't know what to do. He rubbed my back hard, tried to squeeze the pain out of me even as it began to creep into my blood. I shook my head against his chest. My eyes were wide. I was terrified of closing them, of losing my fragile grip on the room around me. If I could just stay here in this moment, in the airport terminal, if I could just hold on, maybe it wouldn't be real.

No, a voice inside me said. Please don't take my brother. Please. I don't want to be left here alone. Don't leave me here alone.

As the tears formed and I closed my eyes, I recognised what I'd been feeling since I left Last Chance. The sickness, the heat, the giddiness. It was Sam.

He was gone.

Chapter 133

I FELT THE fabric of Whitt's shirt pull tight as someone tapped him on the arm. 'Sir, ma'am? Is everything alright? Can I offer you some assistance?'

Whitt pulled away from me, took in the sight of the flight attendant before him like she was an alien creature, her spotless red blazer and unreal make-up a puzzlement. He spoke to her. Gestured. I didn't listen. I turned and looked at the faces of the men and women who'd gathered around us. I looked from face to face. An elderly lady and her husband clutching their matching suitcase set. A pair of pierced young women lugging backpacks. A family. A group of businessmen. I looked at them, and I didn't recognise them.

Once, I would have thought of these strangers as 'civilians'. Non-police. Members of the public whose protection was my duty. They were what I woke for. What I breathed for. These strangers standing around me, those walking back and forth beyond them, getting on planes, getting in taxis.

Now they were just faceless people standing in my way.

I felt a rush of warmth over my limbs, an inner surrender. I was no longer a good Harry struggling to control her bad half. A battle had been lost. I felt dark inside. Hollow, dark and empty of goodness.

Because somewhere out there, beyond them all, beyond the terminal and the airport, Regan Banks was waiting. He was my purpose now. He would be what I continued breathing for. There would be time to grieve properly for Sam later, once I had Regan in my hands. I needed to find him, make him confess what he had done, force him to exonerate my brother. I couldn't let the tears fall yet. There wasn't time for that.

Second by second, he was getting away from me. And I was not going to let him escape.

I was not going to let him be caught by my colleagues, by Whitt or Tox, men who would spare his life.

He was going to be mine.

I walked away through the crowd. By the time Whitt noticed I was gone, it was too late.

I CAN'T STOP running. Not now. Not ever.

I think the police are following me. Unless they're not.

That's the crazy part. I'm just not sure.

Maybe somebody recognized me ...

My picture's been all over. I bet someone called the NYPD and said, "There's a crazy guy, about forty-five years old, stumbling around SoHo. On Prince Street. Wild-man eyes. You'd better get him before he hurts himself."

They always say that—"before he hurts himself." Like they care.

That crazy guy is me. And if *I* had seen me, I would have called the cops, too. My dirty blond hair really *is* dirty and sweaty from running. The rest of me? I feel like hell and look worse. Torn jeans (not hip, just torn); dirty army-green T-shirt, dirty classic red-and-white Nikes. "Dirty" is the theme. But it doesn't really matter.

All that matters right now is the box I'm carrying. A cardboard box, held together with pieces of string. What's in it? A four-hundred-and-ten-page manuscript.

I keep running. I look around. So this is what SoHo's become ... neat and clean and very rich. Give the people what they want. And what they want is SoHo as a tourist attraction—high-tech gyms and upscale restaurants. Not much else. The cool "buy-in-bulk" underwear shops and electronics stores selling 1950s lighting fixtures have all disappeared. Today you can buy a five-hundred-dollar dinner of porcini mushroom foam with frozen nettle crème brûlée, but you can't buy a pair of Jockey shorts or a Phillips-head screwdriver or a quart of skim milk.

I stop for a moment in front of a restaurant—the sign says PORC ET FLAGEOLETS. The translation is high school easy—"pork and beans." Adorable. Just then I hear a woman's voice behind me.

"That's gotta be him. That's the guy. Jacob Brandeis."

I turn around. The woman is "old" SoHo—black tights, tattoos, Native American silver jewelry. Eighty years old at least. Her tats have wrinkles. She must have lived in SoHo since the Dutch settled New York.

"I'm going to call the police," she says. She's not afraid of me.

Her equally hip but much younger male friend says, "Let's not. Who the hell wants to get involved?"

They deliberately cross the street, and I hear the woman speak. "I

have to say: he is really handsome.”

That comment doesn't surprise me. Women like me a lot. Okay, that's obnoxious and arrogant, but it's true. The old gal should have seen me a few years ago. I had long dirty-blond hair, and, as a girl in college once told me, I was a “hunky nerd.” I was. Until all this shit happened to me and wore me out and brought me down and ...

The old lady and younger man are now across the street. I shout to them.

“You don't have to call the cops, lady. I'm sure they know I'm here.”

As if to prove this fact to myself, I look up and see a camera-packed drone hovering above me, recording my every step. How could I have forgotten? Drones zoom through the sky—in pairs, in groups, alone. Tiny cameras dot the corners of every building. In this New York, a person is never really alone.

I stumble along for another block, then I stop at a classic SoHo cast-iron building. It's home to Writers Place, the last major publisher left in New York. Hell, it's the last major publisher in all of America.

I clutch the box that holds the manuscript. Dirt streaks my face. My back and armpits are soaked. You know you smell like hell when you can smell your own sweat.

I'm about to push my way through the revolving door when I pause.

I feel like I could cry, but instead I extend the middle finger of my right hand and flip it at the drone.

ANNE GUTMAN, EDITOR in chief and publisher of Writers Place, greets me with her usual warmth.

"You look like shit," she says.

"Thank you," I say. "Now let's get the hell out of your office and go someplace where we can't be watched."

"Where'd you have in mind, Jacob? Jupiter or Mars?" "Christ. I can't stand it," I say. "They watch me 24-7." She nods, but I'm not sure she agrees with me. I'm not even sure she cares. I lean forward and hand her the box.

"What's this?" she says. "A gift?"

"It's the manuscript! It's *Twenty-Twenty!*" I yell. Why am I yelling?

Anne tosses her head back and laughs.

"I can't remember the last time I received a hard-copy manuscript," she says.

Then I look at her intently. I lower my voice.

"Look, Anne. This book is incredible. This is corporate reporting like it's never been written before."

"You know my concern, Jacob," she says.

"Yeah. I know. You don't think the Store is worth writing about; you don't truly think it's morally bankrupt."

"That's not it. I think it may very well be morally bankrupt, but I can make a list of forty companies that are just as bad. I don't think the Store is *inherently* evil. It's a creative monopoly."

"Read my book. Read *Twenty-Twenty*. Then decide."

"I will."

"Tonight?" I ask.

"Yes. Tonight. Immediately."

"Immediately? Wow. That's fast."

Anne smiles at my minuscule joke. I try to remain calm. I'm sure if she reads the book she's going to be blown away. Then again, maybe she won't be. Maybe she'll toss it after a few chapters. What do I know? After all, I've been wrong about this sort of thing before.

Suddenly there's noise. A scuffling of feet. Indistinguishable but loud. It comes from outside Anne's office. Then a very quick knock on the door. Before Anne can say anything, her assistant opens the door and speaks.

"Ms. Gutman, there are three policemen and two NYPD detectives outside here with me."

“What do they want?” Anne asks.

“They’re here to arrest Mr. Brandeis.”

Anne and I look at each other. I’m about to fall apart. As always, she’s in take-charge mode.

“You go out through the conference room. Then take the back stairs down and outside. Find a place to stay.”

Anne hands me some money from the top drawer of her desk. I turn toward the conference room.

“I’ll handle the cops,” Anne says.

“Read the book, okay?” I say.

“Damn it, Jacob. Of course I’ll read the book.”

She walks out her office door. I also start walking. The last thing I hear her say is: “Good afternoon, officers. How can I help you?”

EIGHT MONTHS EARLIER

MY WIFE, MEGAN, wrote an e-vite to our dinner party that was like Megan herself: funny, sharp, and a touch mysterious:

MEGAN AND JACOB BRANDEIS

INVITE YOU TO OUR

“LAST GASP IN MANHATTAN” PARTY

TUESDAY EVENING, AUGUST 30

8:00 P.M.

322 PEARL STREET

We had invited our eight best friends to have dinner with us in the big goofy-looking loft space that we had carved out of half a floor in an art deco building. If you're thinking when you hear the word *loft* that the space was glamorous, high-tech, and modern, you're thinking wrong. Our very long, very narrow apartment was in what had once been an old insurance company building. After that, it was vacant for five years. Then it was home to a bunch of squatters. Then it was bought by a bunch of would-be writers and artists. Each apartment had a *tiny* view of the East River and a *fabulous* view of the garbage barges docked at the South Street Seaport. We could afford the apartment only because the area at the time (then the Financial District, now very chicly called FiDi) was a no-man's-land. The nearest grocery store was two miles away in Greenwich Village. We could also afford it because we were making *fairly* decent money writing everything from ad copy to catalog copy to an occasional piece for *New York* magazine and the *New York Observer*. Like everyone else in Manhattan who hadn't founded a tech company or managed a hedge fund, we made do. What's even better is that our kids seemed to have no problem making do.

Lindsay was sixteen and attended Spence. When I was a kid at George Washington High, Spence was debutante-snooty. Only a touch of that culture remained, and those types didn't seem to interest Lindsay. In fact, most of her friends seemed to be the Latinos and African American scholarship kids, with a UN ambassador's daughter or Middle Eastern princess thrown in for diversity.

Alex, Lindsay's thirteen-year-old brother, attended a Reform-Jewish prep school, Rodeph Sholom, on the Upper West Side. He pretty much liked his school and liked his friends and didn't hate the subway ride

up to the place. We had sent him there because both Megan and I were thoroughly unreligious—she a lapsed Catholic, I a Jew in terms of culture only. But by the end of his first month at the school, Alex had become almost frighteningly interested in Judaism. He studied as much Torah as he did computer science. He studied Chinese, but he also took Hebrew. And of course he made me feel embarrassed that my knowledge of Judaism revolved around three things: (1) food (matzo balls should be hard), (2) superstitions that no other Jewish family had ever heard of (“Touch a coat button if you see a nun”), and (3) the words *be careful*, which we say to anyone leaving our apartment—a plumber, a great-aunt, a Jehovah’s Witness.

Alex and Lindsay fought constantly with each other, and when they weren’t fighting they were laughing with each other. Plus they read books—real books with real paper pages that you have to use your fingers to turn. These kids were smart, sarcastic, and usually nice. Megan and I really got a kick out of them. I don’t want to speculate how much they reciprocated the adoration.

The evening of the party found Megan and me very nervous. But we had our reasons. I poured Megan her third white wine (an unusually enormous amount for her), and Lindsay and Alex put the final touches on the dinner—Lindsay glazed the poached salmon while Alex scattered the watercress over the fish. “I’m doing water-cress. Dill is a catering cliché.” Great chefs talk tough.

“Live and learn,” I said.

Megan took a sip of her wine and spoke. “Maybe we should have entitled this evening the ‘Last Dinosaurs in Manhattan’ party.”

I laughed and said, “Maybe,” but I knew what she meant. All eight guests were people whose jobs were simply not very important anymore. In a piece I had written the previous month for Salon.com, I had referred to this category of worker as “leftover people in our new hightech world.”

Yes, the friends who’d be eating our salmon that evening were folks waiting to be—as the British would say—“redundant.” I had been thinking of that scene in the movie *The Tall Guy* in which the boss turns to his assistant, Jeff Goldblum, and says, “You’re fired. F-U-C-K-E-D. Fired!” If I sound heartless, I don’t mean to be. It was a fact of life, and it was happening all over the country.

The night was a kind of debutante party for those “coming out” of the workforce.

Sandi Feinblum, the assistant style editor at the *New York Times*, was taking a buyout. She had been assigned to the “traditional” hard-copy newspaper. But the only people who still preferred the printed *Times* were slowly but surely showing up on the obituaries page.

Wendy Witten and Chuck McKirdy were editors of a wine magazine

and a golf magazine respectively; neither publication had transitioned successfully from a newsstand presence to an Internet presence.

We had also invited an executive from Sotheby's auction house and his very nervous, prescription-druggy wife. He was quickly being strangled into oblivion with websites like eBay and iGavel.

One woman had already gotten the ax. A former travel agent. All the people who once used her services were now making their own hotel reservations and printing their own airline tickets. In essence, she had been replaced by William Shatner.

One guy, Charlie Burke, was in a business that was about to be eaten by Fox. When that meal took place, he would probably be known as the last guy on earth who had ever managed an independent broadcasting company. His syndicated sitcoms would be just another part of neocon broadcasting.

And finally there was Anne Gutman, editor in chief of Writers Place. Anne still managed to make a living editing and occasionally publishing a few nonfiction writers such as Megan and I. But she knew—we all knew—that she was the exception to the electronic rule.

Shit. The unemployment office could have set up an application desk in our dining room. What's more, Megan and I would have been first in line.

YES, WE WERE in trouble.

From the outside we still looked prosperous—the crazy-looking loft (full of interesting, artsy “found objects”), the two good-looking teenage kids, the August rental on Fire Island.

But the fact was, we were hurting badly.

To our shock, Anne Gutman had turned down the book that Megan and I had been working on for almost two years. Our proposed project was entitled *The Roots of Rap*. It traced the history of rap music from blues through early rock and roll, then doo-wop, and ultimately the past twenty-five years of rap and hip-hop.

“I just don’t have the funds anymore,” Anne had said. “I had money when you started the project, but I’ve just been squeezed too hard by the Internet Then, of course, there’s always the Store I just can’t afford to take big risks anymore I could shove it into self-publish, but the guys in research told me you’d be lucky to sell five hundred copies.”

The Store. This online colossus was becoming a huge player in the world of publishing. And in every other part of the consumer world as well.

The Store stocked what people wanted. Then, because it controlled pricing, it pretty much told us what to buy. It’s where we all went shopping for our toasters, tractors, Tide, soy sauce, jeans, lightbulbs. If somebody on earth manufactured something, anything, the Store sold it. Potted oak trees, cases of wine, automobiles ... all usually at a lower price than the brick-and-mortar source.

The Store’s publishing arm was churning out e-books, and every once in a while they’d hit upon something really popular. *Okay*, Megan and I thought ... *if you can’t beat ’em ...*

So as soon as the painful impact of Anne’s rejection sank in, we did the only thing left to do. We moved over to the opposition: we flipped open our laptops, quickly pulled up the Store page, then clicked over to “Independent Publishing.” We had no other choice. Why the hell not? Megan and I were sure we had a bestselling e-book.

Within less than a *minute* of logging on, I was having my first e-mail conversation with my “contact rep.”

At the beginning, our e-mail conversations were all warm hugs and wet kisses. A few rewrites. Our promise to start a Twitter account, a Facebook page, an Instagram profile—the usual social-media journey

to the bestseller list. It was going great ... only a matter of time until Megan and I would be looking at book-cover concepts.

Then came the not-so-inevitable kick in the balls. With one tap of the Send button, the Store destroyed our plan. They suddenly rejected *The Roots of Rap*. No reason was given. Their e-mail sounded like a ransom letter: *Your project is no longer viable. The Store.*

My index finger raced to the Reply tab. *Hey, folks, what gives? All of a sudden? This idea is a winner waiting to happen. This book could really live online. It's about music. You know, music downloads. The YouTube clips. The cross-ref ...*

Came a one-line response: *We are as sorry about the outcome as you are. The Store.*

It was clear: the Store was finished with us. Or so they thought.

But we were not finished with the Store. Not by a long shot.

"NEBRASKA! THAT'S NUTS!" Chuck McKirdy shouted. "You two will be moving to freakin' Nebraska?"

Megan stepped in and answered the question with her usual patience.

"That's where the jobs are. So that's where we'll be going," she said softly.

"What's Nebraska's nickname? The Cornhusking State?" Sandi asked.

I corrected her. "The Cornhusker State."

"Go, Cornhuskers!" someone shouted.

The chant was quickly picked up. "Go, Cornhuskers! Go, Cornhuskers!"

"Okay," I said. "The annual asshole convention will now come to order."

Megan smiled, then began a little speech. She said it was hardly a secret in our social group that our most recent nonfiction effort had been rejected "not merely by faithful friends who shall remain nameless"—at this point Anne Gutman jokingly hid her face behind her unfolded napkin—"but also ... and you're not going to believe this humiliation ... even rejected by the Store.

"So with *The Roots of Rap* totally without a future, and Jacob and I—not to mention our two kids—totally without a future, it looked like we were doomed. But just when things looked darkest, lo and behold, the Store came through for us."

We stopped talking. Just for a moment, but long enough to run the risk of screwing up our story. And it was a story, almost a fairy tale. It was a highly fictionalized account of what really had happened.

At that very moment Megan and I were about to tell a very big lie to our closest friends. And even though we had rehearsed it carefully, my stomach was rolling, my chest was filling with acid, and Megan's hands visibly shook. But the starting pistol had been fired. We had to talk. So Megan took off.

"Well, it's sort of crazy what happened next. We thought it was all finished between us and the Store. And Alex and Lindsay even started joking about being so poor that they'd have to decide which relatives to go live with."

I interrupted. "Nobody wanted to go with Megan's family."

She punched me gently. (We had not rehearsed the adlibs.)

“Anyway, we got a message from the Store HR people, and they ... offered ... us ... jobs.”

“Doing what?” Chuck asked. “Writing ad copy or catalog stuff?”

“Well, that’s the sorry part,” I said. “They’re kinda crappy jobs. We’ll be working in their fulfillment center. You know, filling orders and getting them out to people. But ...” I paused. I was lost.

Megan was not going to let that sentence hang there in space. “But,” Megan said, “because the Store is so big and growing, we’ll be eligible for promotions and advancements within three months. Just three months.”

“And that’s the story,” I said, hoping that the strength in my delivery would let me recover and seal the deal with my friends.

Okay, they were surprised. Very surprised. And yes, our friends were still spitting out a few farmer jokes, a few Republican jokes, a few Cornhusker jokes. But as I looked around the room I could tell everyone believed me. Someone mentioned a good-bye party. Someone else mentioned a group bus trip to Nebraska. Yes, it looked like everyone believed us.

Well, almost everyone.

I glanced out the apartment window and saw a drone hovering. It was recording everything going on at our dinner table.

I also noticed that Anne Gutman was looking directly at me. We were good friends, old friends. She had a weak smile on her lips. And I could tell that Anne wasn’t buying a single word of our story.

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